



Didn't I Say
to Make My Abilities
Average in the
Next Life?!

Story by
FUNA

Illustrated by
Itsuki Akata

12

VISIT...

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Didn't I Say —
to Make My Abilities
Average in the
— Next Life?!

VOLUME 12







Didn't I Say _____ to Make My Abilities *Average* in the _____ Next Life?!

VOLUME 12

BY
FUNA

ILLUSTRATED BY
Itsuki Akata



Seven Seas Entertainment

DIDN'T I SAY TO MAKE MY ABILITIES AVERAGE
IN THE NEXT LIFE?! VOLUME 12

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AFTERWORD

Kingdom of Tils

C-Rank Party "The Crimson Vow"



Mile

A girl who was granted "average" abilities in this fantasy world.



Reina

A rookie hunter. Specializes in combat magic.



Mavis

A swordswoman. Leader of the up-and-coming party, the Crimson Vow.



Pauline

A rookie hunter.
A timid girl, but...

Japan



-Kurihara Misato-

A high school student. Died saving a little girl and was reborn into a fantasy world.



-Guild Clerks-

Generally amenable.
Work to support the hunters.



Lenny

An innkeeper's daughter. Always on the lookout for ways to save money.



-Elder Dragons-

The strongest, most intelligent beings in the world. Can speak human languages.



The Kingdom
of Vanolark

The Turning Point:
The Return to Ascham

The Town of the
Dueling Inns

The Spice Incident

The Kingdom
of Brandel

Fief of Ascham



Invasion

Capital

The Town Where Mile
Registered as a Hunter

Capital

The Kingdom
of Tils

Birthplace of the
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Capital

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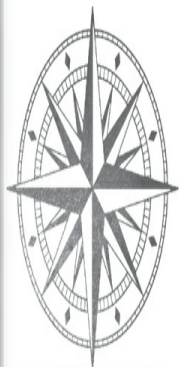
Town

Town

Neighboring
Kingdom

Capital

Capital
Shaleiraz



The Great
Albarn Empire



God bless me?

WORLD MAP



Previously

When Adele von Ascham, the eldest daughter of Viscount Ascham, was ten years old, she was struck with a terrible headache and, just like that, remembered everything.

She remembered how, in her previous life, she was an eighteen-year-old Japanese girl named Kurihara Misato who died while trying to save a young girl, and that she met God...

Misato had exceptional abilities, and the expectations of those around her were high. As a result, she could never live her life the way she wanted. So when she met God, she made an impassioned plea:

“In my next life, please make my abilities average!”

Yet somehow, it all went awry.

In her new life, she can talk to nanomachines, and although her magical powers are technically average, it is the average between a human's and an elder dragon's...6,800 times that of a sorcerer!

At the first academy she attended, she made friends and rescued a little boy as well as a princess.

She registered at the Hunters' Prep School under the name of Mile and made a grand debut with the Crimson Vow—the party she formed with her classmates.

In the midst of a customary training journey, the Crimson Vow rescued a mysterious young maiden and battled with elder dragons. While aiding some children in the mountains, they came across the ruins from an ancient civilization, which still showed a few signs of life!

After all these adventures, the Crimson Vow finally made their way back home to the Kingdom of Tils. However...



Lenny Recaps: Lenny's Battle Records

My name is Lenny, and I'm the poster child of this inn. I'm a bit like a mascot—as well as everyone's idol.

What I leave here today is a record of the first half of my life, which documents the history of this inn...

"I was wondering what you were over here writing! Paper and ink aren't cheap—don't waste them on these scribbles! Also, you're only eleven years old. What's with this, 'half of my life' business? Are you planning on dying at twenty-two?"

"Leave me alone! It's boring being on reception duty in the morning. I need some way to pass the time!"

Now, the history of this inn...

I first met her nine days before the entrance ceremony for the Hunters' Prep School, which is held twice a year. It was on this fateful day that a girl of twelve, with a slightly vapid air and the appearance of having just blown in from the countryside, arrived at our inn to stay the week until the dorms opened.

That girl was Miss Mile, who would become a C-rank hunter soon after.

As a veteran inn employee, I had her number from the moment she walked through the door. "Here comes some airheaded country bumpkin," I thought to myself. "A sitting d—"

No. No no no no *no*! My first impression was of a lovely new customer, one who would surely become a long-time patron.

And I was right! Six month later, Miss Mile had graduated from the prep school, and remembering her earlier stay with gratitude, she decided to make

our inn her permanent base, where she would stay with her companions. We were immediately swept up in intense negotiations for discounts with Miss Pauline, who dared claim that our inn failed to offer sufficient incentives for a newly formed party!

Normally, I would strike down such a challenge on the spot, but I had an inkling that these girls would come in handy. I talked it over with my mother and father, and we decided to give them a discount...on one condition.

Miss Mile and Miss Reina were just fine, but I could already tell that Miss Pauline and Miss Mavis would surely be a huge draw for customers!

Just as I anticipated, the customers came flooding in. Naturally, there were men who wanted to meet Miss Pauline and women who wanted to meet Miss Mavis. Then, there was the fact that we were an inn where a party of young girls was happy to stay—proof that we were a safe and comfortable establishment. This proved to be a selling point with both merchants and other guests. Everything was just as I had hoped!

Then, Miss Mile pitched her idea for that odd “Maid Caffay.” While we were all skeptical at first, Miss Mile was so persistent that Miss Pauline and Miss Mavis couldn’t refuse to play along...

And what a success it turned out to be! My heart’s aflutter just thinking about all those new repeat customers!

I must say I was happy to learn that I had underestimated Miss Mile. She doesn’t seem particularly... Well, I mean she’s rather fla... Let’s just say I didn’t think she had very much combat potential.

I was also worried about Miss Reina. She seemed to hate the whole “Maid Caffay” idea and was always cold towards customers, turning red and shouting at anyone who tried to pinch her cheek. Yet, somehow, that turned out to be very popular.

I couldn’t understand it!

Once, I heard Miss Mile say to herself, “I had no idea that tsunderes would be effective even here...” but I had no idea what she was talking about.

Still, whenever the Crimson Vow went out on jobs, we'd be flooded with complaints and questions. *Why aren't those girls here? Where did they go? When will they be back?*

What could I say? They aren't our employees. Their primary employment is as hunters, after all.

I haven't even gotten to Miss Mile's storage magic, which is kind of rare. She can hold a crazy huge amount, and because of this, while normal hunters are limited to bringing back only as much meat and materials as they can carry, these girls can bring back the entire thing—no matter how big of a creature they fell.

Roughly half of a 300-kilogram orc consists of butcher-grade meat and edible innards. If you kill a group of three or four of them, that amounts to 450-600 kilograms of market-grade parts. Obviously, there is no way that a party of five or six members, laden with heavy armor and weaponry, camping equipment and other luggage, could carry all of that from the middle of the woods back into town.

Yet these girls can bring all of that. In fact, they can hunt down several groups of orcs in one trip and bring them all back, no matter the number. When you think about it, it seems like it's gotta be against the rules!

Of course, if they don't sell the most valuable parts to the guild, the clerks would be cross with them. However, they're usually able to keep some of the more standard cuts, and the meat that's too tough to sell at a high price. I'm certain they still sell far more meat to the guild than other parties to begin with...and luckily for us, they always have some to spare as a nice souvenir for their friends at the inn!

All in all, these girls were simple-mi—er, *dear*—guests, bighearted (with the exception of Miss Pauline), full of hope for the future, and perfect cash c—*guests of honor*, with plenty of interesting tales to tell.

Thanks to their patronage, our customer base and reputation grew, and we

made a name for ourselves as the preferred inn of this exceptional group of hunters.

Our future was looking bright, and I began to think about the future. Soon enough, I would take a husband and assume my rightful place as matron of this inn...or so I thought.

Yes, until that one nightmare of a day...

That day, when the Crimson Vow betrayed me!

It was roughly one month after they began residing at our inn. They had just returned from a guard duty job, which took them away for some days, when they came to me with an outrageous announcement:

“Our financial status is looking up now, so we’re going to move to a different inn.”

Wh-what? What nonsense was thaaaaaaat?!

Those backstabbers! Forgetting all of the debts they owed us! All the help we gave them!

This was akin to a traveling band of performers picking up an orphan and raising him, only for the boy to grow up and declare, “Well, I’m a successful first-class performer now, so I’m transferring to a bigger troupe!” How could a person ignore such an investment of time and money to turn their back on the very ones who had shaped them?

This was unacceptable!

“No way! Have you forgotten all the favors we’ve done for you up until now?!”

“No, this is a perfectly fair transaction. As I recall, the agreement that we made was *mutually* beneficial.”

Guh...

To think we let them stay at our inn and eat our food for an entire month! I mean, they *did* pay us, but... We gave them a huge discount on their lodging

fees!

Though I suppose we did require them to entertain our other guests in exchange...

E-even so! Even so, there's still the matter of gratitude. Gratitude. Grat-ti-tude... *Gratituuuude!!!* What would happen if we lost the Crimson Vow—our inn's trump card and best source of new customers? I set to scheming at once, concocting new plans. A dinnertime Hunting Beauties Variety Show! A breakfast-time morning cheer service!

I tried desperately to persuade them, but they refused me flat-out. "We aren't hurting for money anymore," Miss Pauline said, "so you can't make us do all that embarrassing entertaining stuff."

"Besides," they added, "this place literally stinks. We need to go somewhere with a bath!"

Now, I could concede their point about having to entertain the other guests, but as for the baths...

It would be one thing if we were some high-class inn, with guests who were a bit more flush, but ours was an inn for the common folk. Our low rates and homey atmosphere were our selling points—there was no way we could manage the expense of constructing a bath and hiring staff to draw and boil the water, not to mention the fuel. An inn like ours could not be collecting any pricey bathing fees either. If the baths were expensive, no one would use them in the first place.

Gaaah! This *sucked!!!*

Yet, just as I was sinking into an abyss of despair, Miss Mile came to the rescue!

She was going to build us a bath? For *free*? And she would draw and heat the water with magic?!

Yahoo!!

Just when our troops were on the brink of annihilation, in came a *deus ex machina* to turn it all around! Magic was truly incredible. This *had* to be against

the rules!

When the baths were ready, they invited me to join them for a commemorative wash, in spite of my protests. I mean, I *told* them I shouldn't...

Miss Reina and Miss Mile looked utterly defeated when I got in there, staring at me with eyes like dead fish. Honestly, the fact that I always wear oversized clothing is out of courtesy to our less well-endowed patrons. Though, of course, it's also to keep the boys from ogling me...

Anyway, it's not my fault! The whole bath thing was their idea in the first place!

After further negotiations, we came to an agreement whereby the girls would draw and heat the water with their magic in exchange for free food and drink. With this system in place, we got to offer baths without raising our prices, and as a result, our name was suddenly on the lips of every lady in the city!

Bwahaha...

Bwahahahaha!

We were victorious.

It was all according to my plan...or so I thought.

Until they left on an escort mission?!?!



My hopes nearly perished.

Thanks to the nice big facilities they built us, it took so many trips from the well to fill the tub that my sanity started to crumble... It wasn't just the tub, either. There were the hot and cold water reservoirs as well, each of which was raised on a stand about two meters high, making them incredibly difficult to fill.

They'd made it all look easy with their magic...

We tried asking some other mage hunters if they could do it, tempting them with booze and snacks, but they told us it was too much work. "When you use magic to produce water repeatedly in the same place," they explained, "the efficiency quickly drops, so it would be nearly impossible to produce enough water at one time." Damn these third-rate mages! The girls could always fill the baths with no trouble at all.

At least heating the water wasn't so complicated. Anyone but the very worst mage could manage that by casting a fire spell and carefully sinking it into the water—something they finally seemed to understand after I carefully explained how Miss Mile had been doing it... Damn these third-rate mages!

It was all enough to make me wonder: were those girls actually some kind of crazy geniuses? No. There was no way. *No way!* They were just rookies, fresh out of prep school! What the heck am I talking about?

Even my own mother was no help. "I can handle the front desk," she said, "so you're in charge of preparing the baths, Lenny."

I mean, it makes sense that my father couldn't do it—he is the cook—but couldn't my mother help with drawing the water? When I pointed this out, she just averted her eyes. *Hmph!* She was exercising her "parental authority," and I was at the mercy of her whims!

And so, my days in hell began.

I drew bucket after bucket, dragging the water between the well and the tub and the cistern. Even with trip after trip, the level of the water barely even seemed to rise an inch. Bucket after bucket after bucket after bucket—an endless, unchanging hellscape. The toll it took on my body wasn't limited to simple muscle soreness. I once lost my grip on the bucket handle, and it fell into

the well, scraping up my palms and scratching my hands. Another time, my knees gave way while I was climbing the cistern stand, and I tumbled down, along with the bucket full of water...

I was gonna die! I was really gonna diiiieee!!!

Just when I thought, quite seriously, that I would never survive the ordeal, the girls returned from their job.

Surely they would save me!

They must take responsibility for leaving me on the verge of death!

And, they did.

They helped me to implement two new schemes—partitioning the baths and hiring orphans to draw the water—that allowed me to successfully escape my impending demise! And it turned out that the silver lining of my many days of hell was a newly sculpted physique, particularly noticeable in my arms and stomach!

Yahoo!!!

Alas, my rejoicing was premature.

What?! Leaving on a training journey?!

It's so soon! It's far too soon for that, ladies!

Particularly where I'm concerned!

It's true that such journeys are a mainstay of a C-rank party's lives. There was no one who would be able to keep them from this. Everyone knew it...even me.

If only there were some way to stop them. However, I could sense that this was one of those cases where, the more I tried to stop them, the more desperately my girls would wish to go... Resistance was futile. Besides, I never had the right to try and stop them in the first place. Who was I to interfere with such a thing?

I knew that parties who set off on these journeys rarely returned with their

full membership intact. They overexerted themselves in the name of learning, or got carried away and took jobs beyond their skill level. Though injuries only result from about ten percent of a hunter's jobs, if you take those kinds of jobs five times, or ten times...

Those who do make it back return with harrowed expressions, some missing arms or legs. Sometimes, the parties never come back at all. They always promise, "When we make it back, we'll stay at this inn again, and we'll tell you all about our adventures!" I know they mean it sincerely, and yet...

Meetings and partings are the eternal fate of all those who work at an inn. So, we see them off with a smile. No matter how much they might have contributed to our livelihoods. No matter how much fun we might have had with them. No matter how many wonderful tales they told us.

You mustn't let someone departing on a journey see your tears. Any good innkeeper knows that you see them off with a smile, and when—if—they return, you welcome them with a smile again.

But the moment everyone is out of sight, all bets are off. I'm still just eleven years old, after all.

Weeeeeeehhh!!!

I wept and wept and wept...and then I went to draw water for the baths. After all, my magical helpers were gone once more—perhaps for good. If I at least got some of the water filled up before the orphans came in for work, it would make their jobs a little bit easier. And since they were paid per shift, it wouldn't affect their compensation... In truth, there was simply no way I could work at the reception with my face so sloppy with tears.

I went to find the bucket for drawing the bathwater... Which was when, right beside the baths, I saw...

A hole. About sixty centimeters in diameter.

Around it was a stone barrier, roughly twenty centimeters thick and one

meter high.

There were no two ways about it. It was a well. A well, which had simply appeared overnight.

Who could have possibly constructed such a thing in so little time? Well, I had an inkling.

Ha.

Ahaha.

Ahahahahaha!

We own an inn.

Most of our guests are passers-through of only an evening, *étrangers* of a single moon. There are normal guests, ill-mannered guests, and those who are quite friendly. There are those who return to us and those who do not—as well as those who *cannot* ever again...

Though there are visitors to this inn who have made their way across the whole continent, I will probably spend my entire life in this town. Every day, I'll take my turn at the desk, and draw water, and make the beds. I'll repeat this pattern day in and day out.

But I won't let my life be ordinary.

We're going to make it big. This inn is going to be the most prosperous in the land. The crown jewel of the nation. Those hunters who stayed here are going to be world-famous someday, and we will rise alongside them. I'd bet everything on that. One day we will surely claim our victory.

No matter what happens, I will never give up!



Chapter 85:

The Strength of the Empire

“Is this a ‘red mark’ job?” the voices of the Crimson Vow chimed in unison.

The guild master was unable to reply.

They were right, after all. This was a so-called red mark job. That alone was enough cause for any normal hunting party to decline the request.

Indeed, even if it was at a guild master’s direct request, and even if the contribution points might be decent, there was little incentive to accept a job where the pay was relatively bad and there was a chance one might not come back alive. It was impossible for the dead to collect a reward, after all.

Of course, if there were massive profits to be had, parties might be more inclined to brave some danger. However, this was not the case with “red mark” jobs, which, by definition, offered an unfavorable ratio of risk to reward. Even if the potential

payoff let you live in luxury for the next ten years, a less than ten percent chance of coming back alive made it simply not worth it.

These were the sorts of job no one would be expected to take. And for the most part, hunters refused them.

Normal hunters, anyway.

Mavis smiled at the guild master. “Please tell us a bit more about it.”

It should go without saying that the members of the Crimson Vow were not normal hunters.

“Of course, this doesn’t mean that we’re accepting the job just yet. We’d just like to hear a bit more about the circumstances and job expectations.”

When Mavis spoke, the guild master had begun to look hopeful, but his expression faded again at Pauline’s words.

“Of course. I’d never push this on you without explaining it first—and I would

never encourage a hunter to accept a job without sufficient information. Are you all aware of the Albarn Empire's recent attempt at invading the Kingdom of Brandel? It ended in failure, with an unexpected and immediate full-scale resistance from Brandel's forces."

"Ah, y-yes, we'd heard something about that..." A bit frazzled, Mavis managed to squeeze out a reply. Not only had they *heard* about it, they had been directly involved in making it happen.

"Ah, that's right! You all were traveling westward at the time. I suppose you would've... There was also that illegal intrusion in the Amroth area... Wait, I'm an idiot! You were there, weren't you?"

"Ha ha ha."

The members of the Crimson Vow laughed uncomfortably, choosing not to reveal that this was not the only related incident they had been involved in.

"Anyway, it seems the palace would like to dispatch a team to look into these suspicious bastards, but it stands to reason these guys will be on the lookout for anything of the kind. As such, anyone entering the country under suspicious circumstances is likely to be followed. And if any spies are discovered, there's no doubt that they will be killed. Anyone the Albarnians send out are gonna be pros, so they'll be able to identify a trained soldier or spy from a mile away. But we were wondering if you might be able to slip past them..."

"So the idea is that you would send in someone who's skilled enough to deceive them?" Mavis asked.

The guild master shook his head.

"Take covert action to evade detection?" Pauline offered.

The guild master shook his head again.

"Kill all the lookouts?"

"That would start a war!!!"

Reina's suggestion was utterly absurd. However...

"Send in amateurs?" said Mile.

“Uh...” The guild master looked dumbfounded.

“A ha ha! Obviously not!” Mavis laughed.

“Miley, there’s no way—” Pauline cut in.

“Could you try saying something sensible sometimes? People are going to think we’re idiots!” Reina chided.

The guild master, however, was silent.

“Huh?”

“Huh...?”

“Huh???”

“Don’t tell me...”

Miley smiled smugly as the guild master quietly nodded.



“So we’re just pawns?!?!”

“Huh?”

“You aren’t seriously calling us ‘amateurs,’ are you?”

In the face of Mavis, Reina, and Pauline’s rage, the guild master hastened to explain himself.

“Of course not! No amateur would have the know-how to collect the necessary information, properly analyze it, and then judge what was relevant or not. Doing so would require a specialized education, and...”

“You still haven’t said we’re *not* amateurs!” Reina snapped.

“We can’t risk sending anyone who’s clearly physically trained and drilled with martial knowledge. Instead, we’ve chosen a few greenhorns who, like you, have plenty of know-how but won’t attract attention. What we’re asking you all to do is to guard them. In other words, this is just a particularly important escort mission. If our agents’ guards are visibly overpowered or seem like soldiers in disguise, their cover will be blown. This makes you perfect for the job—a party who’d never be mistaken for soldiers or spies, but will still be able to protect our agents from bandits or monsters.”

Everyone was silent. But, as they thought about what the guild master was saying, they had to admit it made sense. It was true that if things went poorly, they might be attacked by imperial soldiers. However, the Crimson Vow was not the sort of party to turn down a job simply because it was dangerous. Furthermore, all of the Empire’s actions as of late—the attempted trade blocked by the disguised soldiers, the instigation of treasonous acts against the villagers during the fairy-hunting incident, the curtailed invasion of Mile’s homeland—could be considered acts of hostility toward everyone the Crimson Vow held dear, and even toward their own future livelihoods.

Plus, if things went poorly—and even if they went well—there was likely to be a new attempt at invading Mile’s, or rather, Adele’s, motherland of Brandel. Yes, that was *incredibly* likely.

Furthermore, it did not seem that this scheme was one that the guild master had cooked up himself. This had to be an item straight from the royal agenda,

something that no mere guild master would be proposing on his own. He had spoken of “a few greenhorns with plenty of know-how,” and somehow, the members of the Crimson Vow suspected that these would not be members of the guild staff. Indeed, such a person would likely come from the military or the palace.

So, it was most certainly the palace who had issued the request. The next question was whether it was the royals themselves, or the guild master, who had thought to present this task to the Crimson Vow?

There could be only one reply for a rookie C-rank party aiming to become A-ranks one day.

After exchanging looks with her fellow party members, Reina declared, “We will accept this red mark job!”

“Um, I thought I was the party leader...” muttered Mavis, for what felt like the hundredth time.

“Off we go again, huh?” asked Mile as they made their way back to the inn.

“Well, we shouldn’t be gone that long this time. This is just an escort mission, really. There are plenty of jobs like this that might take you away for a whole month,” said Pauline.

“I guess that’s true. Still, it almost seems like they were just *waiting* for us to get back...”

“Actually, they probably *were* waiting for us,” replied Mavis.

“Huh?” Mile seemed surprised.

“Well, I mean, if they ended up waiting for a while and we didn’t show up, they would probably have found some other party to do it. But clearly the guild master had us in mind. So when we did return within an acceptable time frame, they probably waited for us to finish resting up, which wasn’t really all that long, even when you count the time we spent with the Servants...”

There were few guild masters in the world who would extend such consideration to a novice C-rank party. If what Mavis theorized was true, they

had been honored with very special treatment.

“I wonder...” began Reina, doubtful. Regardless of the truth, the end result was the same: The guild master had offered this job to the Crimson Vow, and they had accepted. That was where things stood.

Lenny was flabbergasted at the party’s news.

“What?! You’re heading out again? But you all just got back!”

“Well, not exactly. We’re not going off on a journey this time, just a normal round-trip job escorting a small merchant caravan to another country,” Mavis explained.

Lenny was quiet. Though she was always quite blunt with the other three members of the Crimson Vow, for some reason, she could never stand up to Mavis.

“It would really give us that extra bit of encouragement we need to know that you’re waiting here for us, Miss Lenny!”

“Wh-wha...?” Lenny blushed and dashed away into the kitchen, cheeks pink.

“Mavis, I swear...” Reina sighed.

“Huh? What?”

Mavis was oblivious. Truly, having such natural magnetism with the ladies was a fearsome power!

Despite what she had said to Lenny, this job was still a journey. A journey of nearly a month, in fact, plus some time spent at their destination. Of course, the Crimson Vow didn’t need to prepare for travel, so the number of days they would be gone was irrelevant to them. All of their luggage, a large amount of food, and other daily necessities were all contained within Mile’s “storage.”

This is bad, Reina thought as she remarked, not for the first time, on the ease of their preparations. *I can’t imagine life as a hunter without Mile...*

On numerous occasions, Reina had tried to instill in herself a sense of discipline, so that she would not forget how to live as a normal hunter. Yet in

spite of her best efforts, she had grown so accustomed to this lifestyle that it was hard to even imagine traveling without some magical storage on hand.

At least Reina was aware of this. Mavis and Pauline, who had no hunting experience prior to meeting Mile, and virtually none without her since, had zero sense of their own shortcomings in this area. Sure, they had done a few days of “Mile-free” practice on days off when she was not around, but they’d treated those the same way a group of city kids might enjoy going camping and “roughing it” now and then.

Perhaps Mavis and Pauline, who had never experienced loss in the way Reina had, believed that the four of them would simply continue on in this life indefinitely. Reina, however, knew that such a thing was an impossibility...

Ugghh! That storage magic is way too convenient! It's just unfair!

Indeed, it was a devilish magic, that storage spell... Though of course, unlike Mile’s “storage magic, or something like it,” most normal storage magic would still see its contents spoiled by the passage of time. Let alone have the capacity to so easily accommodate a tent or washroom or an entire dragon...

Two days later...

“We are the merchants who have hired you.”

The members of the Crimson Vow found themselves face-to-face with the three self-proclaimed merchants. The three men, one in his mid-thirties, one in his mid-forties, and one in his late forties, were all thinly built, none appearing especially muscular.

Normally, a merchant would not be quite so explicit in his introduction—he would merely introduce himself as the client, or give his name. Indeed, given the setup and the specifications of the job, there was no need to specifically present oneself as a merchant, and yet this is what the man had done.

All of which meant it was highly unlikely that these were actual merchants. Of course, the members of the Crimson Vow were already well aware of this, based on what the guild master had told them.

The Vow and their clients confirmed the requirements of the job—to escort this caravan of three wagons to the capital of Albarn, along Albarn’s main highway, then make a few stops around the Empire before returning—along with the outline of their planned route. These plans were nothing more than provisional; the route itself and the towns they would stop in were subject to change, depending on the circumstances of the trip.

It made sense, of course, to remain flexible—even normal merchants would do the same. A bridge might be flooded out after a big rain, a mountain pass might become impassable following a landslide, or the price of the goods they were carrying might rise in one area and fall in another; to be able to change plans according to new information was a necessary skill for any capable trader. The only exception to this was when one had a contract or agreement in place ahead of time.

“No need to be tense,” said one of the men, dropping his merchant guise to speak frankly. “We aren’t the only investigators, after all. We’ve already sent a number of teams out into the Empire, in a number of disguises: peddlers carrying their wares on their back, those pulling carts, independent merchants with just one wagon, and even some non-merchants, such as hunters, missionary priests, and so on... Although, of course, those aren’t their main occupations. And there’s no telling how many of them are going to get useful information or how many will make it back safe.”

“What do you mean, ‘No need to be tense’?! ” raged Reina. “If you’ve got someone else who can bring back the necessary information, then you don’t care if this whole team gets wiped out? I certainly won’t stand for that! You can all go and throw your lives away if you want, but spare us the involvement!”

Putting your life on the line to protect someone was all part of a guard’s job, and naturally, death was a possibility one accepted. However, being subject to the whims of an employer who cared nothing for their own lives and intended to act recklessly was grounds for cancellation. Seeing Reina’s point, the men quickly backpedaled.

“N-no, that wasn’t what I meant! I just meant that those guys are the ones who are in charge of the more direct, illegal approaches. All we’re expected to do is to act as normal merchants and bring back any information that we ‘just

so happen to overhear’—nothing dangerous. We will be adjusting our route based on the information we gather, but we won’t be doing anything extreme. We have specialists to take care of that sort of thing, and we’ll leave it to them. We’re just bureaucrats; we don’t have any training or practice in warfare or espionage...

“This isn’t one of those Miami Satodele books where we’ll be collecting intel by some outrageously dangerous method. We’re just going to have some conversations with the locals, gather some rumors, and do our best to run down a few leads. That’s what we’re most suited to. We aren’t going to do anything at all illegal or risky, so you can just think of us as perfectly normal merchants.”

Even if they went on to desk jobs, if this were modern-day Earth, these men would have at least received the basic training required of all members of the armed forces. Perhaps this was not the case in this world, or at least within Tils...

Or, they might really be bureaucrats or office workers and not soldiers at all...

Mile shrugged. She had heard that even in modern-day Japan’s Self-Defense Forces, the desk jockeys were not considered true SDF members and did not go through tactical or physical training.

Meanwhile, Reina sheathed her proverbial sword. It seemed she had misinterpreted their clients, though she certainly had no intention of apologizing. How else was she supposed to have interpreted the man’s words?

The clients did not appear to mind Reina’s ire. Perhaps they were good-natured sorts, or at least patient enough that that sort of thing was not enough to wound them.

At any rate, things went more smoothly after that.

“Huh? Yes, well, I suppose that’s fine, but...”

Out of nowhere, Pauline had asked whether their employers minded if the Crimson Vow did some of their own business along the way. Though the client was a bit bewildered, he offered a tentative affirmative. The guild master had

told him ahead of time that there was a storage magic user among the escorting hunters. As such, he assumed that the Crimson Vow merely wished to take advantage of any resources in their storage to make a little bit of pocket money.

It was easy to overlook a group of young girls running a little side hustle between guard duties. After all, their guarding work would mainly be done while the group was moving between towns, and no one expected them to get into any scuffles as a result of their sales. Even if they were busy selling their goods, they would remain right beside their clients, leaving plenty of time to come to the rescue if some local hooligans were to come causing trouble. All in all, the notion was a fine one.

Plus, the aim of this expedition was to gather information, not to turn a profit. Their aim was to sell low and buy high in order to attract as many people as possible and gather all the information they could. Having some young ladies peddling their wares alongside them might even bring in more business...

Yet, when the client suggested this—

“Are you serious?!” Pauline shouted.

“You’re giving peddlers a bad name!!!” Reina raged.

“If you sell your goods at substantially lower than local market price, you’re going to cause a commotion and be a bother to the other merchants!”

“You’re supposed to be spies! What are you thinking? You’d have to be stupid to want to stand out like that!”

“If your prices are clearly way too low or too high, everyone is gonna be suspicious of you! What townspeople are gonna share their gossip with someone suspicious?!”

It was an utter beatdown. Given their own backgrounds, there was no way that either Pauline or Reina could accept this plan.

“It’s hard to even tell who’s the real merchant at this rate...” Mile stewed. “Or wait, I guess our clients here *aren’t* real merchants...”

It was just as Mile said. Though she was still quite young at the time, Reina

had helped with her father's business, playing salesclerk alongside him, which meant that she could at least be said to have some experience as a merchant. Likewise with Pauline, who had helped at her own father's shop...

"Also, you're all a bit shrimpy-looking. You should put on a few layers under your clothes, or roll up a spare change of underwear in there, so you can look a bit plumper."

Pauline wasn't wrong. The three men were all rather thin and shabby in appearance. This was probably inevitable, given that the trio was comprised of office workers of some description. However, if they were truly to pass for merchants successful enough to command a whole caravan—not foot peddlers or those with hand-drawn carts—one would expect a bit more meat on the men's bones. Plumpness equaled profits and would ensure they would not be mistaken for a pauper or bandit in disguise.

Furthermore, in order to ascertain the quality of foodstuffs one might purchase, a refined palate was required, so it was as good as common knowledge in this world that any skilled merchant was rotund.

Weight equaled wealth; it was a mark of success and a way to attract the ladies. This also meant that no one was going around wasting money on dieting fads.

It was time for Pauline and Reina to step up. "Starting now, we will be your guides. Before we set out, you all are going to learn the ways of the merchant!" Pauline and Reina's Merchant School was open for business.

Why, Mile wondered, were they quite so fired up about this? It seemed a bit out of character to—

"And then we're going shopping!"

They seemed equally fired up about the commercial aspect of this journey. Perhaps they had caught on to Mile's side hustle during the dwarven village incident and intended to orchestrate something similar.

The clients did not seem to be especially concerned about any of this, likely assuming that the Crimson Vow did not have very much in the way of storage capacity. In this world, common sense would suggest a girl like Mile could store

a few dozen kilograms at least, and two to three hundred kilograms at most. How wrong they were.

“We’ll be heading out the day after tomorrow, so let’s use today and tomorrow to stock up!”

After their little merchant charm school wrapped up its lessons, the Crimson Vow’s pair of resident merchants urged Mile swiftly along to the wholesale district. This was not the typical shopping area lined with retail storefronts, but a neighborhood filled with warehouses where one could buy in bulk.

While this was the sort of behavior one might expect of Pauline, Reina seemed unusually enthusiastic. Perhaps she was recalling her younger days, when she traveled as a peddler with her father? Of course, Mavis tagged along too, probably not wishing to be the odd woman out,.

“Mile, do you know much about the Empire?” asked Pauline.

“Ah, well, I did at least have a private tutor until I was eight. And though I dropped out, I had classroom lessons at an academy in the capital for a while. So I at least know a bit about our neighboring land...” Mile answered bashfully.

Mile—or rather, Adele—was no star pupil. Still, it was obvious to everyone at the Academy that this was a front.

“So then, you must know why they’re referred to as a major power?”

“Of course! There are three areas where they’re powerful: size of territory, military strength, and...burden on the population.”

“Well done!” said Pauline, patting Mile on the head. Mile giggled.

Indeed, while the Albarn Empire spanned a vast territory, it was not an especially fertile land. Large swathes of the nation were comprised of wilderness and precipitous mountain ranges, with few major rivers flowing through the country’s interior. Those tributaries that did exist were mostly small streambeds, which carried little water and quickly dried up. Thus, food was often insufficient, and the economy was troubled. They had plenty of wood and mineral resources but little to distinguish themselves from the neighboring

lands.

Furthermore, there was little profit to be had in transporting large quantities of wood or iron over long distances along the sharply graded roads. Other countries had plenty of their own resources already. There had yet to be any Industrial Revolution, so there was little need for mass quantities of iron and copper. Most countries were perfectly self-sufficient with respect to natural resources.

Even if they could turn a profit in such ventures, there was the threat of bandits and monsters lying in wait for returning caravans laden with profits and newly purchased goods... Trade with other countries was simply out of the question.

The Empire had no farmland, no food, no money...and an abundance of both iron with which to forge weapons and wood to fuel the fires of the forge. There was truly only one path they could follow with no detours: the military one. They invested all their resources in arming their troops, placing further stress on their food sources and the economy. All of which meant that there was only one way to see returns on that investment:

War. Pillaging. Acquiring new territory and fertile lands. Conquering an indentured labor force they could work into the ground, and a population that would become their new second-class citizenry.

This was how the future of the Albarn Empire would be decided.

Would they absorb the surrounding lands and become a true superpower? Or were they on the road to ruin at the hands of the other nations who would rally together and crush them?

“Oh, over there! We can get tons of cheap wheat from that dealer! We don’t want pricey goods, just lots of cheap stuff that people in the Empire can buy. Because of limited carrying capacities, normal merchants have to stock more expensive merchandise in order to turn a profit, but we have Mile, so...”

“Our dear Mile...”

“Ha ha...”

“Ah ha ha...” Mile’s laugh rang a little empty compared to the others.

As long as Pauline is happy... And we’ll be saviors! All of the citizens of the empire will be overjoyed!

“Hee hee. Ee hee hee hee...”

“Mile! Let’s stop by some shops that sell cheap booze for the masses! If it’s the low-quality stuff, then the people in the Empire should be able to buy it!”

“R-Reina, you can’t just go around shouting things like ‘cheap booze’!” Mile hurriedly interrupted. If the citizens and merchants around overheard Reina carrying on, they would be grabbing her by the collar to pick a fight in no time.

She couldn’t help but notice, again, how unusually enthusiastic Reina seemed. If stocking up on goods for sale was reminding her of traveling with her father in her youth...well, that was better than growing gloomy at the memory of those she had lost.

“I wonder if we should stock up on some luxury items, too,” Reina continued. “We can’t push the price of stuff like flour or salt too high, but we can sell luxury goods at whatever price we want. If there are shortages, and enough folks are desperate to get their hands on our goods, we can milk ’em for all they’re worth!”

“No, Reina, look, you can’t just go around shouting like this...” Mile protested again, but she was unable to halt Reina’s rampage. She looked to Pauline for back-up, but—

“Hee hee hee... Eee hee hee hee hee hee...”

It was no use. Pauline was just as bad as Reina, perhaps already riding the high of what would be their first true mercantile venture. This was no simple negotiation or the straightforward sale of their homemade figures—for once they were choosing their own stock and setting their own prices.

For the entire day and the next, Pauline and Reina dragged Mile all around town on their grand mercantile scheme...

“All right! It’s time to set out!”

“Yeah!”

At Mile’s shout, all three wagons began moving.

Though they were filled with goods, each one was outfitted with simple canvases. From afar, they were indistinguishable from cheap passenger wagons. Of course, given that there were three of them traveling in tandem, and there were no mounted guards in sight, it would be plenty clear to anyone that this was in fact a small merchant caravan.

The traveling party consisted of the three faux merchants and their three wagons, along with three drivers and the four members of the Crimson Vow.

Each of the wagons was drawn by two horses. When traveling the hilly roads of the Empire, it was desirable to have a surplus of towing power—which meant two horses at minimum. Assuming, that is, that one had the funds to invest, desired a consistent travel speed, and wanted to maintain a general standard of security. Naturally, this particular caravan was not the sort to sacrifice time or safety just to save a little bit of cash.

Typically, there would be one merchant riding in each of the wagons, but given that the three were not real merchants, there was no point in insisting on this. Besides, the road was long and boring, so instead the three of them rode together in the second wagon, where they would be able to talk. Truthfully, the Crimson Vow should have been riding in the same wagon as their clients—or perhaps, distributed themselves amongst all three wagons. However, it was tedious to sit alone with the cargo, and riding along with the merchants would be too stifling. With the men, they were restricted in the topics they might discuss, whereas alone, they could let loose and relax a little bit.

With all this in mind, it was determined that the members of the Crimson Vow would all ride together in the first wagon, an arrangement the merchants accepted with some relief. Perhaps they too would have felt stifled at having to spend such lengthy amounts of time with a group of young ladies.

Granted, any group of male hunters would have been thrilled at the idea of spending so much time up close and personal with the Crimson Vow, but these men were of a different sort.

“So, is everyone all right with the current plans for this escort?” asked Reina, as the Crimson Vow conferred in the first wagon. It was important to discuss these things in private in order to avoid revealing too much.

“Yes, sounds good to me.”

“I’m in!”

“No objections!”

The Crimson Vow was in agreement. They had already discussed their whole plan of action back at the inn, so this was nothing more than a formal confirmation. It was unimaginable that any of them would object at this point.

This expedition was a long-term trade foray, a condensed operation of three wagons crossing national borders. Common sense would suggest to any bandits that these wagons would be carrying high-priced goods—in other words, items that would allow a merchant to turn a profit even in relatively small quantities. In which case, one would expect a guard contingent.

It was due to these factors that the Crimson Vow had decided to ride inside the wagons.

If they were to show themselves, any bandits who saw them would assume that they must be dealing with a group of rookie merchants who hired some cheap, greenhorn C-rank hunter girls as a way to scrimp on coin. Under this assumption, they would descend on the group immediately, cackling all the way.

After all, the aim of this job was not bandit elimination. If they were to capture any thieves, dragging them all the way to the next town to turn in to the authorities would slow their speed considerably. There was not enough space to carry additional people in the wagons, and it was always an ordeal trying to make uncooperative bandits walk.

Knowing this, the Crimson Vow was determined to concentrate on the job at hand—and they certainly were not going out of their way to purposely attract or capture any bandits, rewards or no.

If they did not show themselves, most sensible bandits would assume that these guards were rather skilled—senior enough that they would receive the

preferential treatment of being allowed to ride inside the wagons instead of walking, even at the cost of space for the merchants' inventory. Therefore, bandits would not attempt to attack them without some measure of caution.

In truth, the conjecture that there were "rather skilled" guards on board would be altogether accurate.

"So we'll smother any sparks that come flying our way, save any ally spies from danger, fight for the sake of any beast-eared girls, chase down any profits, and never pass up any chance to look cool."

"Of course! After all, we are..."

"The Crimson Vow!!!"

The Empire had no idea what sort of absurdities were about to hit it.

The caravan set out from the capital headed towards the southwest. They would be approaching the country to the immediate west, Mile's home country of Brandel, but rather than crossing the border there, they would turn southward into the Albarn Empire.

The group assumed that nothing of note would occur between their starting point and the border of Albarn. As long as no particularly stupid bandits got it into their heads to attack, that part of their journey should go smoothly.

There were not very many merchants who would purposely head toward the Albarn Empire. Given the precipitously sloping roads, traveling through the region meant increasing the number of one's horses and lessening one's load. Those carrying their goods on foot would never be able to weather such a journey. Furthermore, the general market conditions in Albarnian towns were bleak, the citizens possessed of little purchasing power, and the political climate was less than favorable as well.

With this in mind, it was only natural that few merchants would possess the whimsy—or rather, foolishness—to purposely enter the Albarn Empire, especially when the Kingdoms of Brandel and Marlane to the west and east presented none of the same challenges. Some merchants might be tempted to make the grave miscalculation of assuming that the lack of competition in the

Albarn Empire would allow them to make a killing. However, the reality was that there were no such windfalls to be found.

What this meant for the caravan was that they were a rare sight, but there was little they could do about that, and so, it was not something they could worry about.

“From here on out, we refer to this group as a normal merchant caravan,” Reina said. “We’ll refer to our clients only as ‘the clients’ or ‘the merchants’ or else by the shop name and their individual names. Mentioning anything about ‘spies,’ ‘the capital,’ or an ‘investigation’ is strictly forbidden. There could be eyes or ears anywhere, so we can’t talk about that stuff even when it’s just us. Plus, we need to get in the habit, so we don’t slip up in front of someone later. Understood?!”

The other members of the party nodded. This was the most basic of basics on a covert mission like this. All of them were well versed in such affairs...thanks to Miami Satodele’s spy thrillers.

Happily, their employers were on their level, too. There could be no blind spots among those who had studied with the most knowledgeable Miss Satodele.

In fact, if there was any major concern to be had, it would be that Miami Satodele’s novels were in circulation in the Albarn Empire, too. However, this had yet to occur to a single one of either party...

When they stopped to make camp, there was all the typical jaw-dropping on the parts of the merchants and drivers, who were amazed by the tent, the food, and everything else—but really, those scenes were business as usual, so I will spare you the details here.

“Why is it we’re already being attacked by bandits when we haven’t even made it over the border? On a road that so few merchants ever pass through...”

Indeed, the three wagons were surrounded by bandits, both fore and aft, blocked in by thick logs that the bandits had placed to prevent them from escaping. The Crimson Vow were within the wagon, not yet having revealed

themselves to the brigands outside.

“It’s probably *because* so few merchants ever pass through. If it’s so rare for them to get any targets passing by, they probably don’t have the luxury of choosing which ones to approach,” supposed Mile.

“Ah...” the other three sighed.

The less abundant the prey, the more desperate the predator. A starved wolf cannot afford to be picky about what it hunts.

“Well then, why don’t they just move to somewhere with more targets?”

“Bandits need their own territories. Besides, they might not want to move away from where their families and relatives live. We can’t just assume that every single bandit is an orphan, without a single relation in the world. They might even just be farmers who do a bit of banditry on the side, or huntsmen’s wives with a part-time gig.”

“Ah...” Mavis seemed to buy Mile’s logic, but Reina just looked annoyed.

“Why is it that you always have a weird explanation for everything?!”

Clearly, she just wanted to fight the bandits and had no interest in theorizing about their livelihoods.

“Even so...” Pauline trailed off.

“Good point.” Mile nodded. “Right now, they’re nothing but bandits who are attacking these merchants. Even if their intention is not to wipe us all out, until the merchants surrender, they’re going to attack us with everything they’ve got, and I’m sure they won’t care if any of us wind up dead. And, even if we surrender, they won’t be satisfied by taking the cargo—they’ll want to take any girls who they can make some money off of, too. Such is the way of these kinds of criminals, after all!”

Mile had very little tolerance for those who broke rules without a care. Indeed, she carefully obeyed both the rules of this world—which clearly indicated that the guards of a merchant caravan attacked by bandits were justified in taking down those bandits—and the rules she had decided for herself—which she thought of as Mile’s rules, or “Mi-rules” for short.

Reina gave a shout. “Our objective is to crush those bandits! Crimson Vow, roll out!”

“All right!!!”

“Bwah ha ha ha ha!!!”

Seeing the hunters disembark from the head wagon, the bandits burst out laughing.

“We were wondering what kind of powerful guards these guys had with ’em, but it’s just some rookie little ladies!”

“Not that we were really concerned when we decided to attack. No matter how strong y’all were, we figured we could overwhelm you with numbers. No matter how powerful a knight is, he’s got no chance against a hundred farmers attacking him with bamboo spears. So with just four little greenhorns here... Still, we don’t wanna see anyone hurt on our side, so this is probably a blessing. Hurry up and surrender; leave your wagons, cargo, and equipment; and get outta here!”

The bandit party numbered just shy of twenty. They were a mixed group, none of them seeming especially filthy or grizzled, ranging in age from around fifteen or sixteen into their fifties.

These have gotta be a bunch of moonlighting farmers... the members of the Crimson Vow thought.

Despite the fact that there were four young girls present, these rabblers seemed perfectly content to take any valuables and leave the group unscathed. Rather considerate for a group of bandits, when you thought about it. Though, given that they weren’t professional bandits, they probably just lacked the connections necessary to take a group of women hostage and sell them off into slavery. (Of course, “professional bandits” was a rather odd turn of phrase...)

“All right! Just go ahead, and—”

“Firebomb!”

“Fireball!”

“Godspeed Blade!”

“Aqua Shower!”

Bwa-boom!

Ka-bwow!

Shnkshnkshnkshnkshnk!

Fwashaaa...

After Reina and Pauline’s fire attacks, Mile had chosen a water spell to make sure to extinguish the flames...

“There’s a town just before the border, so we can turn them in there.”

“Yeah, it’d just cause trouble if we tried to turn in a group of bandits captured here in Tils to authorities somewhere within the Empire. For one thing, there’s no telling what kind of reward—if any—we’d get for turning in foreign criminals. It’s lucky that there’s still a town we can take them to before we get to the border.”

It was indeed lucky, as Pauline suggested, though it only made sense that there would be a fairly large town along the main highway, just before the border. Similarly, there would be a town on the other side of the border, as well—hence the term, “border towns.” There were plenty of reasons that settlements cropped up in these sorts of places.

“Please, you’ve got to help us! We’ve got families to care for...”

Once captured, the bandits’ tone quickly transformed from that of threatening outlaws to groveling farmers. The Crimson Vow, of course, utterly ignored this. Bandits were a calculating lot, and there was no point in giving them any leeway. It was likely that they had killed who knows how many people before—and the people who they had robbed and killed would have also had families to care for. If the members of the Crimson Vow were to simply let the bandits go, there was no telling how many more lives and livelihoods they might take.

If nothing else, the young hunters could not afford to set the precedent that bandits could simply cry their way out of being captured, especially after committing such villainous acts. Even if you were just considering a simple shoplifter who claimed, “I don’t know what got into me, it’s the first time I’ve ever done this, please, forgive me!” there was nothing to stop them from merely saying this every time, when in truth they were habitual offenders. As such, one could not simply overlook a crime. Whenever criminals were captured, they had to be thoroughly punished.

Thus, not a single member of the caravan spared a thought for these offenders—not even Mile.

Were they really farmers? Were they usually honest, hard workers?

That did not matter in the slightest.

They had heard all the lines:

“He’s a good man as long as he isn’t drinking!”

Then, the fact of his drinking at all is proof of his poor judgment.

“The devil made me do it! It was a total impulse!”

Well then, the next time you end up in a similar situation, the “devil” might just come calling again.

Such acts could not be overlooked.

“So, um, we did already hear about this from the guild master, but...”

The merchants appeared to be quite impressed by not only the Crimson Vow’s skill but also their lack of hesitation when it came to facing down opponents. Apparently, being able to see this skill for themselves was something of a relief.

Despite having heard that the party was strong, their clients were still aware that they were working with a group of teenage girls. It was only natural that they worry what might happen if they were faced with an attack. Now, they had just beaten nearly twenty bandits—moonlighting farmers or no—without any additional assistance. Clearly, this was a relief to those they were guarding, an assurance that they would make it back from this job alive.

“This is gonna slow us down until the next town, though...” said Reina. The whole reason they had hoped to avoid bandits on their journey was precisely to avoid this sort of situation. They could not possibly load this many people into the wagons, but binding them all with rope and forcing them to walk would slow things down immensely.

However, given that the bandits had attacked, there was little else to be done. They couldn’t just slaughter them all to avoid the trouble of dragging them to the next town, and letting them all go was equally out of the question.

“We have no choice,” said Mile “Let’s tie them up with the Pauline method, and hurry up and get them to town!”

“Guess so.” Reina, Mavis, and the merchants all nodded.

As for Pauline...

“Please don’t attach my name to a method of tying up criminals!!!”

She seemed rather angry.

Indeed, the methods used by the Crimson Vow were ones that Pauline had put forward. First, both of the bandit’s arms were drawn behind his back and his thumbs tied together with Mile’s special fishing line. If he tried to break through it, his thumbs would be lopped right off, never again to grip a weapon or farming tool... Then, each bandit was attached to the back of the wagons with ropes tied—not around their arms or torsos—but around their necks. If they failed to keep up with the speed of the wagons, their necks would be squeezed, and...

“Huh? But it’s normal to name a new technique after its inventor... With this amazing innovation, your name is sure to go down in history!” Mile replied.

“I didn’t invent them! These are ancient methods of transporting convicts—you just didn’t know about them before!” Pauline screamed.

“Oh, really?” asked Mavis.

“I’d actually assumed those were something you invented too, Pauline...” said Reina.

“Right? That’s what I thought. Like, who else could come up with such

brilliantly ruthless methods?" Mile agreed, sounding vindicated.

"Both of you shut up!!" Pauline screeched, as though she was truly about to snap.

Meanwhile, the merchants and drivers quietly made their preparations to set out, pretending as though they had heard nothing at all...

"Transform!"

Mile shouted something incomprehensible as she leapt over the stone marker indicating the national border.

Now and then, the members of the Crimson Vow would disembark from the wagons and walk alongside them. It was important that they not grow stiff, unable to move swiftly at a crucial moment. Of course, the merchants did not follow suit.

Mercantile wagons such as these, laden with goods, were not particularly fast, certainly no faster than a group of C-rank hunters. In fact, in patches where the road was rough or muddied from the rain, walking was actually far more expedient. Plus, if the wheels or axels were damaged from the impact of bumps or resistance from the mud, a walking pace would far outstrip the wagons.

At any rate, Mile, who was walking outside of the wagon along with her companions, had clearly been hoping to commemorate the moment of crossing from one country into another.

Naturally, the rest of the party completely ignored her, but Mile was fired up.

"We've already earned some money for turning in those bandits, so our job is truly underway!"

The others smiled wryly. They had turned the bandits in with the town guard just before the border, although they had gotten some peculiar looks, owing to the fact that their captives did not appear to be full-time bandits.

If these people were in fact farmers, it would be a bit of an ordeal for any small village to lose so many able-bodied workers all at once. In the worst case, it might even prevent them from paying their next round of taxes, forcing them

to sell themselves or their own children. Under such circumstances, a village might fall to ruin. This was less than desirable for the local lord.

Still, bandits had to be punished, and the hunters who captured them had to be paid. If these were full-time bandits, who had come in from some other territory, they would have welcomed this capture with open arms. The town could easily make back the money they needed to compensate the hunters with the profits from selling the offenders into criminal indenture. But here, this would likely not be the case.

Fortunately, this was no business of the Crimson Vow or their employers. The members of the Crimson Vow had conducted themselves perfectly as guards, and prevented countless other travelers and merchants from being attacked in the future, so it was only right that they should be awarded with payment. No lord or government official would have any reason to complain about this.

That said, the low-ranking guards who had brought the Crimson Vow some tea and snacks as they awaited their payment explained a few things to them. And as the girls sipped their tea, Mile, Mavis, and Pauline began to look a little bit troubled. Capable men truly were a different breed, the three thought, impressed.

As for Reina? Reina was of the mind that all bandits should be slaughtered and had no sympathy for any of them, regardless of their full-time job status.

Here is what the guards explained...

There had been a number of bandit attacks reported between this town and the next town over, back in the direction from which the Crimson Vow had traveled. However, not once had these bandits caused any injuries. Indeed, these seemed to be fairly kindhearted bandits, taking only cargo, money, wagons, and horses, never attempting to whisk anyone off into slavery... (Of course, the phrase “kindhearted bandit” was a bit of an oxymoron, but here it actually seemed to fit!)

During the preliminary investigations, the bandits had already confessed that they were from a nearby village. Of course, with or without a confession, any full-time bandit would be sentenced to life of criminal indenture—so it was

obvious what choice they would make.

Furthermore, there were some extenuating circumstances at play. Not only had they never laid a hand on any of their victims, but also it seemed they had done so out of concern for the village as a whole. Regardless, the lord of this place had apparently confessed that it was an indication of his own failure that his villagers had been driven to such lengths.

Pauline objected to this. “He’s just pretending to be a good person! If the village was destroyed, he would get less tax revenue, the other lords would laugh at him, and it would bring him under the scrutiny of the king!” Regardless, the others thought, if this lord was willing to go so far as to take the blame in order to help out these peasants, then perhaps he wasn’t so bad after all.

Their payment still turned out to be a fairly hefty sum, including the reward, the commission for indenture, the price of their silence, and a few other add-ons. Therefore, it took quite a while for the full payment to come through, which gave them plenty of time to learn about how the bandits would be handled.

First off, the offenders themselves, and all of the leaders of the village who had approved of their actions, would receive a lashing. Henceforth, all of the surrounding villages would be instructed to keep a close eye on them. Furthermore, a new rule of compulsory labor would be imposed on the village. Yet, they would also be provided with enough food to live until the next harvest.

Was this truly a punishment? Or a relief fund?

Either way, despite having committed a crime, the people of this impoverished village near the border would be able to atone for their sins and live another day. Truly, their capture had only happened as a result of their bad luck at having attacked the Crimson Vow rather than some other party. Clearly, their lord was a kind and sagacious personage...

Of course, if they were ever to make such a mistake again, there was no guaranteeing a repeat of this kind of mercy.

At any rate, the Crimson Vow had happened to earn themselves a bit of money and now made their way into enemy territories. (Technically, war had not been declared, but danger was certainly present.) With both the reward and contribution points they would receive for a special assignment well done, they were now one step closer to their ambitions. At this thought, the members of the party were beaming.

“Let’s get going!”

“All right!!”

Mile took off, and the other three members of her party—and the wagon caravan—followed her into the Albarn Empire.

Chapter 86:

Sales

“Okay, let’s set up shop here!”

It was the third day that the caravan had been within imperial territories. As they would not be able to obtain much new information anywhere near the border, up until now they had merely proceeded onward toward the capital with only brief stops. Finally, in the current town, they decided it was time for a bit of commerce.

Of course, their goal was not to make any large-scale deals with the merchants of the Empire. That would mean their stock would be depleted in just a few transactions, and they would have no reason to head further into the country, which would seem suspicious. True, there was a little money to be made transporting goods from one Albarnian town to another, but this was not the sort of thing that was typically profitable for foreign merchants.

It would be far more logical to take one’s goods elsewhere rather than linger in a place as dismal as the Empire.

At the end of the day, the function of this caravan was to kill some time making small sales to the ordinary citizens, loosely gathering what information they could along the way. Getting intel out of nobles and wealthy merchants was best left to the pros and was not the function of these particular merchants.

“All right, drivers, please unhitch the horses and lash them to the trees over there. We will remove the wagon tarps and start setting up shop. Crimson Vow, you all keep on the lookout for pilferers who are waiting for us to let our guard down. Try not to interfere in our shop preparations. There’s a bit of skill involved, so we don’t need you getting in the—er, making a mess of—no, um, helping us out.”

Here the man had let his true feelings show, but it was true that if amateurs interfered, it would cause nothing but trouble. Even though the men were only

pretending to be merchants, surely they at least had done some minimal practice beforehand and gotten some real merchants to show them a thing or two...

The design of the wagons was very well thought out. Some of the goods for sale would be taken down from the central platform of the wagon and lined up on a sheet spread on the ground. However, they could also simply remove the tarp and display a good deal of their wares on the wagon itself.

In truth, Reina had some familiarity with this type of convertible shop wagon, but it would be a bit awkward to have only one of the four of them helping out, so she kept quiet.

“As long as you all stay near enough to come back right away if any trouble arises, then we don’t mind if you go ahead and wander around a bit or take a nap while we’re doing business,” said the head of the merchants. Of course, the Crimson Vow—and Pauline in particular—already had another activity in mind...

“Let’s get the traveling shop, House of the Holy Maiden, ready for business!”

“Ho-ho-ho-HO!!”

This time, instead of their typical hunter’s call and response, the other members of the Crimson Vow answered Pauline’s declaration with a phrase that had become familiar via Mile’s stories, the catchphrase of a certain djinn. It was a powerful battle cry!

Mile then peered around at their surroundings. It was still early in the morning, so there were few people about. She waited until there was absolutely no one looking their way, and...

“Tada!”

Fwoom!

Beside and a little behind the three wagons, a large, familiar tent suddenly appeared. In front of it, in line with the wagons’ display, was a table and chairs. Mile moved immediately into the tent, likely to unload all of the merchandise. It was better to take her time and carefully select the goods to sell away from prying eyes.

The merchants did not appear surprised at all by this turn of events. After all, they had already seen her in action many times while setting up camp at this point.

After a short while, a heap of wooden crates and sacks began to grow behind the table. Though they were a little ashamed to do so, the other three left Mile to transport their wares alone.

The stuff was pretty heavy, after all, and while Mile could carry these items handily, for the rest of them, that kind of repeated stooping and carrying might cause back strain.

And so, they left the task to Mile—the only one truly suited to the job. They could always help out with anything that Mile happened to be bad at, they told themselves...

While Mile was busy carrying things, the others lined up the product samples atop the long table. Unlike the varied wares of the merchants—a large variety of goods with a small quantity of each—the Crimson Vow had gone for larger quantities and a more limited range, thinking that it would be a pain to memorize the prices of too many different goods, which would also be less efficient to display.

Of course, they didn't intend to sell their whole quantity of any item in one place, instead, selling some portion of the total in each location. Strategically, they planned on limiting sales to only an amount that would not be unnatural to sell at one time—a quantity that would not take up more than half of one wagon. That way, no one would realize that what they were carrying was inconsistent with the carrying capacity of the caravan—though of course, few people would even pause to give such things a second thought.

Furthermore, they had also been thoughtful about not overlapping with the merchants' stock, aiming for cheaper items that would be of use to the common folk of the Empire, rather than expensive luxury goods. Of course, they had some specialty items—like the aforementioned “cheap booze”—but for the most part, their wares consisted of things like wheat, barley, and salt. This meant their sales could take place without much conversation.

After all, gathering information was the job of the merchants, not the Crimson Vow. These sales were an independent operation on the part of the hunting party, and it was nothing more than an added bonus for the merchants if their presence helped attract more sales.

Of course, they worried whether the merchants, who after all, were actually bureaucrats and information specialists, would be able to properly elicit any gossip from their customers—however, it stood to reason that they had been selected for a reason. Not every researcher was necessarily socially awkward, and thought must have gone into choosing these men for this job.

“Okay, preparations complete! Let’s open up!” Pauline shouted. The Crimson Vow’s sales began. The merchants had already begun selling—without similar fanfare.

The customers began to flow in, and despite the supposedly poor economy and low purchasing power in these parts, a relatively large number flocked over to browse the merchants’ wares. However, browse was all they did. No one asked questions or attempted to haggle. Perhaps there was nothing here that they considered a bargain by the standard market prices in the area, or perhaps they were merely window-shopping, enjoying looking at these unusual items. That said, it was important for a merchant to value even those customers who did not buy anything. You never knew when someone might return to make a purchase.

Furthermore, the real goal of these “merchants” was to talk to their customers about things other than business. As such, the men did not go out of their way to force any sales, simply letting folks enjoy themselves while they chatted about the trends and rumors in this foreign land.

“That’s surprising...”

“I didn’t expect that from them at all...”

“To think they’d be this good at customer service... I guess we shouldn’t underestimate researchers...”

“Well, they were selected after all...”

Thwunk, clunk!

“Ow!”

Reina smacked Mile and Pauline on their heads with her staff.

“What was that for, Reina?!” Mile griped.

“Didn’t I tell all of you not to talk about this stuff?”

“Ah...”

Sure enough, they had clearly established that they were not to discuss anything sensitive, even when they were alone. While it was likely that no one had overheard this particular conversation, there were in fact townspeople close nearby. Though Reina and Mavis hadn’t necessarily spilled any secrets, using words like “researchers” or “selected” was strictly forbidden.

“Forgive us!”

“That was careless!”

Prudently admitting their own fault, the pair apologized.



At first, the Crimson Vow, who only had samples of ordinary goods like flour, salt, and alcohol atop their display table, had no customers. Instead, everyone huddled around the merchants' wagons, with their variety of fascinating goods. This made sense. Necessities or no, flour and salt were commonplace items. Though there were shortages of them, these items were not totally scarce and could easily be obtained by saving up a little coin. Furthermore, once you factored in the transport and handling, heavy, bulky goods like this tended to get quite expensive, due to the costs associated with many days' travel over poor and winding roads.

The prices also had to factor in labor fees, guard salaries, upkeep on the horses and wagons, and the less-than-zero probability of being attacked by bandits or monsters along the way. Once that was all calculated, imported goods tended to be several times more expensive than usual. No matter how cheaply one could acquire something straight from the source, a fifty or sixty percent mark-up quickly outweighed any initial savings.

It only made sense that the customers would ignore the Crimson Vow, moving past their tent to see if there was anything interesting or unusual on offer from the merchants.

Yet the members of the Crimson Vow were unbothered. If they did not make any sales here, it was no matter—they still had plenty more chances for success. They could simply put everything back into Mile's inventory and sell it off at some later time and place for more than they purchased it for. If nothing else, there were times when a bad season yielded poor crops, and war provisions were always in demand.

This inventory of Mile's, with its endless capacity and ability to perfectly preserve its contents...there was no doubt that it gave them a bit of an unfair advantage.

"Huh? These are so cheap!" a middle-aged fellow gasped in shock. Having finished his perusal of the merchants' goods, he had moved on to the Vow's table.

"Wheat, barley, salt, booze...and is this sugar? You brought these all this way

—at these prices you’re gonna end up in the red!”

The man wasn’t wrong about the Crimson Vow’s prices.

But hadn’t Pauline specifically said *not* to sell things below market value, even aside from the fact that they might end up in the red?

So then, why...?

“It’s because these are such low-quality goods!”

“*Huh?*”

There was a collective sound of confusion from the crowd. Had the salesgirl really just referred to her own goods as “low quality”? No merchant would ever do such a thing—except, of course, when they were trying to get a bargain from the person they were purchasing them from, that is...

Still, there was no merchant alive who would permit a salesgirl in their employ to refer to their own wares this way. She would be scolded, yelled at, and perhaps even thoroughly beaten. With this in mind, the customers looked to the merchants, but...

The girl had spoken loudly enough that they must have heard, but they did not seem to pay any attention to her words, simply carrying on their negotiations and gossiping.

“Ah! This shop is actually independent from those fellows. Our prices have nothing to do with them. The four of us manage this shop, so we’re in charge of everything,” said the silver-haired girl with a smile.

The townsfolk could not hide their shock.

This group of girls, ranging from somewhere around twelve to eighteen, were mingling with merchants and running their own shop? That in itself was surprising enough—before one even considered that they were somehow turning a profit with these absurd prices. How in the world...?

“As I said before, these are lower-grade goods. The grains are small in size, and on inspection we found a lot of empty casings, batches that have started to sprouts, some with an excessively high moisture content, others that have been stored in a warm area, and so forth. We can’t sell these at normal prices. But

the ones that have started to sprout are still fine as long as you aren't too fussy, and the ones that were improperly stored won't last as long, but they should be fine to use right away. Really, they are perfectly good! However, the prices were way cheaper.

“Basically, we struck a bargain on these ‘special goods’ and brought them to a place where we could sell them for a fair price. It’s the same with everything here—it’s fine as long as you use it up right away, but the stuck-up folks in the capital considered it ‘inferior’ and wouldn’t buy in. Still, everything comes with written expiration dates and appropriate warning labels. If there’s anyone here who doesn’t mind that, then these are a steal!”

“.....”

The customers were a little stunned to hear such a forthright, candid explanation. And yet, they understood.

In fact, her explanation made it abundantly clear to them how these girls were able to sell these goods at such low prices—and that they were not doing so out of any intent to deceive their customers. Rather, they deduced, this was a strategy that these girls had devised, no doubt to give themselves a way to do business in spite of their own lack of capital.

Plus, these items were expensive here, due to shortages. They were becoming harder and harder for the poor to get their hands on. They never had the spare cash to buy enough of these supplies to store long-term.

All of which meant that if they could buy these goods, which were still perfect usable despite their defects, at a cheap price, wasn't that quite the steal? Customers swarmed to examine the labels on the various products.

It was all going according to plan...

Deep down in their hearts, the four members of the Crimson Vow grinned.

“You four are amazing,” said one of the merchants to the Crimson Vow, as they all sat down for dinner that evening at an inn.

Normally, merchants would only spend one night at an inn in the town they

were visiting. After all, the cost of rooms for not only them, but their drivers and guards, would add up quickly over the number of nights involved in even a short journey. It would be a faux pas for only the merchants to lodge at an inn, leaving the rest of their group out in the cold. Then, once you factored in the need to find an inn that had a stable, a shed large enough for the wagons, and someone to mind the horses and guard the cargo overnight, any cheap establishments were out of the question, and besides, security would be a concern at any inn with rougher clientele.

As a result, merchants typically overnighted at camping sites prepared here and there along the highway, only staying at an inn maybe once a week in order to gather more information for their sales or simply to give their bodies a rest from rougher sleeping conditions. Even when staying in town on business over the course of several days, they often just pitched their tents in an open field or the town square.

However, this expedition's goal was not to make money. As a result, they would be staying in inns almost every night—and fairly nice ones, too.

Cheaper inns were filled mostly with low-level hunters, who were unlikely to have any particularly useful information. Besides, other agents—traveling as hunters themselves—would have been dispatched to learn as much as they could from these groups. The duty this group had been assigned was to get information out of the staff at fairly pricey establishments, as well as the influential types who were likely to stay at these locales.

That said, should they happen to catch sight of any other merchants or influential-looking high-ranking hunters setting up camp at the sites just outside of town, their party could swiftly alter their plans for the sake of connecting with them. In fact, it would be far easier to drum up conversation with fellow campers than with those who just happened to be staying at the same inn. By sharing Mile's excellent cooking, they might open up communications and ingratiate themselves to other travelers—and the merchants promised to pay Mile extra for any efforts in this vein.

"It's remarkable that these girls have such savvy business sense at their young age... While normal merchants focus on stocking high-price goods for long distance sales in order to ensure a profit even if the margin is slim, these girls

are making a killing selling reject goods for just a little below market value... It's astounding!"

Mile beamed at this high praise, though the other three wore conflicted expressions.

In truth, even if a normal group had thought of this strategy, it would have been hard for them to pull it off without Mile's incredible "storage" skills. Furthermore, getting such large quantities of these bargain goods was not that simple. Most of what they had stocked were merely cheap and low-grade, but otherwise normal products. (Of course, Pauline still had haggled hard for them.)

They were able to make a profit because they had purchased cheap goods in large quantities...and gotten them to market with zero transportation costs.

Any member of the Crimson Vow would be happy to be recognized for her wisdom and efforts, but in this case, they knew they were relying entirely on Mile's abilities. They themselves had done nothing they could be proud of, and they were not so shameless as to let themselves get a big head for something they hadn't done. Instead, they merely pouted, not saying a word, leaving Mile fully in charge of dealing with the merchants.

"You all have been a huge help. Thanks to you, we've had a ton of people coming over to ask, 'Who are those girls?' and 'Do you all sell any cheap products like that?' Getting people to talk about anything other than business without arousing their suspicions is the hardest thing to do. You can't get much information out of exchanges like 'How much is this?' and 'Here's the two silver,' after all. It's incredibly helpful if they're the ones to bring up these other topics themselves... It's unfortunate that you've already run out of inventory."

The merchants assumed that the Crimson Vow, having already sold several hundred kilos of goods today, would have reached the limit of Mile's storage capacity. Thus far, Mile had prudently—yes, *prudently*—not shown them too much of what she was capable of.

They'd seen the tent, of course, and assumed that it took up the remainder of her storage space, with all of the cooking implements and ingredients Mile had shown them packed inside it. The capacity of one's storage was limited by both mass and volume, so it would be unthinkable for anyone to store an empty tent

fully constructed...

Of course, the Crimson Vow had purposely convinced them that the tent was stuffed, in order to keep too much information about the true capacity of Mile's storage from getting back to the palace. Little did they realize that even what Mile had revealed so far was more than enough to pique anyone's interest... Habit was truly a dangerous thing.

"Wh...?"

It was their second day of setting up shop in town. The merchants were wide-eyed and speechless as they watched the Crimson Vow once again unload a great deal of goods from the tent and pile them up behind their table.

If the Crimson Vow's inventory ran out, like it had the day before, were they going to produce even more items from the tent? The merchants couldn't believe such a thing would be possible.

Nope! Nope nope nope nope nope nope nope nope!

"Let another fierce battle for the wandering shop, House of the Holy Maiden, begin!" shouted Pauline, full of confidence.

"*All right!*" the other members of the Crimson Vow replied, and with that, the day's business was underway.

Indeed, as far as merchants were concerned, commerce was a battlefield, where they went to war with customers, the capricious demons known as opportunity, and themselves.

They had already mostly sold out of the damaged goods they had advertised the day before, which meant that everything they had for sale currently was low-grade but otherwise normal in quality. Thus, if they did not get more serious about their sales, they would not turn a profit. While they were selling at a price that might have been expensive for truly damaged goods, it was incredibly cheap for normal quality items, even low-grade ones.

The tough conditions, however, only got Pauline more fired up.

“This is just a trial run for using Miley’s storage for commerce! We can take notes on this, and use this data for the future... Plus, with the sales I’ve predicted, we’re definitely going to end up in the black!”

Apparently, this sales tactic was one that she had purposely selected, even knowing that there were more efficient methods out there. Hearing this decision, the others had to wonder...

“So, you’re planning on relying on Mile’s storage forever? Even after you retire from being a hunter and move into the mercantile world?”

“Pauline, that’s kind of...”

“Wh-wh-wh-wha?! I don’t plan on being some merchant pack mule for the rest of my life!!!”

Reina, Mavis, and Mile all had plenty to say about this.

“Huh? What?!” Pauline looked stunned at their criticism.

“What’s with that look? Like you have no idea what we’re saying?! We only decided to do this as a way to help out the impoverished imperial citizens!” cried an exasperated Mile.

The other two simply sighed.

Mile was not a pack mule, and it was clear Pauline’s greed had gotten her into trouble again.

“Pauline, you’re aiming to be a first-class merchant, aren’t you? Would you really be happy relying on cheap tricks like Mile’s special abilities to make your money?”

Ah! Mile and Reina froze.

Mavis had just crossed a line. What she was saying was not wrong, and if Reina or Mile had been the one to say it, Pauline would have been in no position to argue. However, for Mavis—of all people...

“I don’t need to hear that from the aspiring knight with the magical trick arm!”

“Gwah!”

Yep. There they go...

Mile and Reina grimaced at Pauline's response, watching as Mavis withered to the ground with this fatal blow.

Indeed, Mavis had chosen to keep Mile's magical arm, thinking that it might help her to become a knight... So, she was truly in no position to judge Pauline for her actions.

Ignoring Mavis, who was of no use to anyone at this point, the other three got to work. The three (temporary) merchants watched the whole exchange fearfully from their wagon nearby.

Real merchants are terrifying! they thought to themselves.

Though of course, Pauline was still just a merchant's daughter, not a full-fledged merchant yet.

"Mile, some of the low-grade spirits, please!"

"On it!"

One after another, goods were sold and steadily restocked from the tent's inventory. One of the best-sellers seemed to be the liquor, labeled "rain-damaged with a short shelf life."

How was it that alcohol could be rain-damaged?

The answer was unclear.

However, this was not an inconvenience to the customers. In fact, a few customers had purchased a bit as a sample and opened it on the spot to try. It wasn't anything fancy, but there certainly wasn't anything wrong with it either—and as this news spread, the remaining stock began to fly off of the proverbial shelf.

Then came the third day.

Yet more "defective" goods were carried out of the tent.

"I knew it..."

At this point, the three observing merchants had as good as given up.

“We’ll be leaving this town tomorrow,” the leader of the merchants announced at lunchtime.

“Normally, we’d stay for about a week, but the people here were way more apt to talk than we imagined, so I think we’ve gathered all of the intel that we will from this place. Sales are starting to decline, too.”

In truth, that last point was hardly relevant, given that making money was not their chief goal. Yet even though they were simply playing at being merchants, they really were making sales, and it had started to become fun for them, a bit like a game. Now that they were starting to see profits, it was impossible not to get a little bit fired up.

“There’s no reason for us to sit around and try to wring one hundred percent of the rumors out of this town. As long as we get about seventy or eighty percent, that’s plenty. These are just rumors, after all, so it’s not as though it’s all reliable intel. Afterwards, we’ll look back at the gossip we’ve collected on all of our stops and see what trends we can identify: how the reports differ based on distance from the capital, what differences and divergences there are, and use all that to get a sense for how people are feeling. With that in mind, it makes more sense for us to get going again rather than staying in one place long-term. Naturally, some of the stories we hear will be largely embellished, so it’s only by collecting a large body of information that we’ll be able to determine what’s really true.”

“I see...” said the Crimson Vow.

Finally, they understood why these men had been tasked with this. They were clearly not merely some office workers who had been given a special mission but true specialists in the field of intelligence.

Not every information specialist was going to be some impressive 007 type. Most of them were probably totally unremarkable older guys, who looked like normal people and weren’t particularly handsome or impressive or strong.

Although this world was far behind modern-day Earth in terms of scientific

knowledge, in the field of espionage, they were more or less up to speed. After all, on Earth, by the time of the ancient Greeks, mankind had already advanced quite far in terms of philosophy, with plenty of deep thinkers who could outwit even many modern men and women.

The people of this world are lacking in knowledge in regards to science and technology, but they aren't fools. In fact, these agents seem particularly sharp... thought Mile, impressed.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow appeared equally impressed by this unexpectedly astute explanation from their clients, who had appeared at first to be nothing more than bumbling old men. Mavis was especially impressed from a strategic standpoint, while Pauline was already thinking about how this information analysis could be applied to business.

In a rare turn, it was Reina who still seemed to have not quite grasped their logic. That was fine, though—this was not the sort of thinking that had any bearing on the actions of a mere hunter.

At any rate, making swift departures was the Crimson Vow's bread and butter, so there were no problems on that front.

"Understood. We'll be ready to set out tomorrow."

All of the preparations involved in leaving—informing the inn of their departure, gathering feed for the horses and food for the humans, changing the wagons back into traveling mode, and other such details—were the responsibility of the Crimson Vow's employers, the so-called merchants. Therefore, Mavis suggested the party take advantage of the afternoon ahead. "Why don't we close up shop early today and see if we can find any local specialties, anything we can sell for more down the road, or something to bring back to Lenny or the orphans as a souvenir?"

"Agreed!"

Normally, souvenirs were things to be purchased on the way home, as they tended to take up room in one's luggage, but that was no concern for the Crimson Vow...nor were expiration dates, nor the capacity of the wagons, nor item's size or weight. They had Mile.

Furthermore, if the Crimson Vow could sell anything they picked up here for even a copper more than they purchased it, that was pure profit. They had no transportation or protection costs, after all. The exasperated looks on the faces of the merchants were inevitable...wholly inevitable.

Chapter 87:

Journey Through the Empire

“Rolling out, right on schedule! Into the ‘Empire’...”

Everyone utterly ignored Mile’s cry.

And so the caravan set out from the inn...

On an escort job such as this, it was typical for the employers to take care of arranging the water, snacks for break time, and general meals. If the guards had to carry their own food and cookware, that would be excess luggage, on top of which it would be a pain to cook separately every time. Most importantly, disparities in meals could be a major source of unrest.

In military units, both the lower and higher-ranking soldiers all ate the same food for this same reason. It would be bad for morale otherwise. Such things were typically even specified in the job contract.

“Soup’s on!”

Yet for some reason, Mile had been pulling her own cookware and ingredients from her “storage” and cooking for the group as she always did.

She was doing this neither out of consideration for the merchants, nor as some special service, but instead because the other members of the Crimson Vow were already threatening to bite her head off at the thought of having to eat garbage travel food...on their very first night camping.

Normally, at least for the first few days of the journey, they would have fresh food to eat, after which, it was time for the non-perishables to make their debut—except when the party was able to hunt small animals or find edible wild plants. Furthermore, this caravan would be traveling along the main highway, without detours, always staying in inns when they reached town and never having to go more than two or three days camping without fresh supplies. They weren’t hurting for money, so they would never run out of food

and would be able to enjoy a relatively proper meal at the end of every day...at least according to any normal standard.

But of course, this group was *not* normal.

Most normal caravans were composed of merchants who were accustomed to life on the road—which meant they were capable of at least basic cooking. It would not be unusual for some among them to even be able to cook more elaborate dishes or come up with recipes of their own. True, drivers did not typically cook, as it was mainly the merchants who did the cooking, but still, it usually followed that for the first couple days out of town, all members of a traveling party would have proper food. Surely, this should be the case here as well.

Moreover, it simply looked bad to have Mile cook food for the entire group at every meal. Even setting aside the burden it put on her, there was no need to do such a thing under the terms of their contract, which stipulated that, as usual, it was the employers who should be in charge of providing food. The Crimson Vow had agreed to this at their pre-job meeting. However...

On the very first day of their journey, they had been greeted by the Holy Trinity of third-rate travel meals: hardtack, jerky, and soup base with bits of crappy vegetables in it. The soup, furthermore, was lukewarm and bland, accompanied with nothing but slivers of dried fruit.

The fact that they had been served this on their very first day meant that they could expect the same every time they camped, from here on out, until the end of their journey.

Honestly, what had they been expecting from a group of emaciated scholars, really? They should have predicted this from the start. And yet...

“What the heck is this?!?!”

“Quit messin’ with us!”

“Is this some kind of joke?!”

“Are you really sure about this...?”

There was a chorus of protests.

It was not only Reina who complained but Pauline as well. Even the typically mild-mannered Mavis had veins bulging in her forehead as she fought desperately to keep her cool. Mile was the only one who seemed to remain fully calm.

After all, Mile could always produce food from her inventory in a pinch and cook it up in a snap with her own heating magic. Given that she could just eat whatever she liked, whenever she liked, it did not really matter to her what the merchants put in front of them. Furthermore, since her previous life as Misato, Mile had never been especially picky about food.

Of course, she could discern good-tasting food from bad, and she would never pass up a delicious meal. And, in the areas where she *was* picky, she was very picky. However, for every time that Misato enjoyed the taste of a high-class meal, or experienced joy of encountering some exquisite morsel, she had equally appreciated the finer points of instant ramen. Indeed, she was not the sort who would flip over the dinner table at the sight of some subpar cooking. Whether gourmet or cheap fare, a delicious meal or an only okay one, she could appreciate any culinary offering. As such, Mile did not appear particularly concerned about their situation. However, she was clearly the only one.

“Mile! Next time, you’re doing the cooking!”

“Huh? But we already agreed that—”

“Next. Time. You’re. Do. Ing. The. Cook. Ing!”

“Uh? But I thought we all decided... *Eek!*”

Mile let out a shriek as she noticed the suddenly murderous gaze of Pauline and Mavis upon her.

Thus, it was decided that for the rest of the journey, whenever they were on the road, Mile would be in charge of preparing the meals, snacks, and drinks. Pauline helped out, of course, and even Reina pitched in by boiling the water with her fireballs. Mavis was in charge of chopping any vegetables and trimming any meat.

In the end, mealtime went exactly as it always did...

Once humans get a taste of luxury, they are not wont to give it up. That was just the way of things.

“Reina, weren’t you the one who was saying we should try and get used to life without Mile?” asked Mavis, looking a bit guilty.

Reina’s reply was calm. “Well, it’s like Mile says, isn’t it? ‘That’s then, and this is now...’”

There was no hope. None whatsoever.

Steadily, the caravan approached the capital, repeating their performance from the first town at each stop along the way. As time passed, the merchants’ stock grew quite diminished, and again and again they ended up having to purchase a portion of the goods that the Crimson Vow had stocked up on back in Tils...at an inflated price, of course.

It was not as though they had only purchased cheap foodstuffs. They had also prepared some classier items to sell to the wealthy citizens of the imperial capital and other large cities, along with more items that they could pawn off on the merchants at a premium.

Indeed, they had predicted that the merchants’ stock would end up running so low that it would look unnatural for them to keep selling...or at least Pauline and Reina had.

“Gates of Babylon...”

Anything was possible with their near-infinite “warehouse”...

“So here we are now, in a large town near the capital!”

“Why are you telling us this? We’re all aware!”

Mile often felt as though she should make some announcement upon arriving in a town. It was the same as when she would declare, “We’re home!”—a statement of fact to acknowledge their progress.

“We’ve done a fairly thorough survey of the rumors in the surrounding rural

settlements and the attitudes of the people who live there. We've heard a lot about what sorts of compulsory service local lords have instituted, and current and future conscription plans... This only covers one part of the lands outside the capital, but it's not bad as a general survey—and it does make sense to focus on the region between the capital and our Tils.

“Next, we'll be doing an inquiry into the major cities around the capital. Unlike those little country towns, there will be nobles and authorities there with much sharper eyes, and there's a far greater danger of encountering spies. We should be fine, since we're just some normal traveling merchants, but it'll probably prove dangerous for us to ask about any political or economic or military affairs directly. Everyone, be careful not to say anything imprudent,” the merchant leader warned the Crimson Vow.

This was common sense of course, but a reminder never hurt.

“Understood,” said Reina, nodding in unison with the others.

The Crimson Vow were not involved with the information gathering in the first place, but when young girls were making the sales, customers often tended to start talking of their own accord, which meant they would often end up unintentionally collecting a fair bit of information. And of course, anything good that they heard, they would report to the merchants later.

It was time for round two of the great espionage affair to begin.

“Huh...?”

They had set up shop in a large town near the capital.

As usual, they pulled up into the town square, and the Crimson Vow arranged their open-air stall while the merchants readied their wagons. Yet this time, the merchants were stunned to see that the Crimson Vow's stock had changed dramatically, almost before their eyes.

Up until now, the girls had been selling chiefly cheap, or low-quality foodstuffs, but now they were displaying luxury items and more high-quality goods. They had previously shared some stock with the merchants—at a decent mark-up—but these were even more expensive items, different from those.

Naturally, they were not marketing their wares only towards nobles and the wealthy; on the contrary, they still had many items to cater to the common citizen, but even those would count as luxury items for people of modest means.

“It’s normal to change the variety and pricing of your stock based on location and clientele, isn’t it? There’s a big difference between selling to people in the countryside and people in big cities,” said Pauline. Reina nodded.

It was normal for Pauline to think like a merchant, but even Reina seemed particularly interested in all this lately, too. She was probably recalling her time traveling with her father.

The information they had gathered up until now was really only as rigorous in quality as the results of a questionnaire—vague and uncertain rumors that had filtered in from larger settlements near the capital, and the opinions of rural citizens, who knew little of centralized affairs or politics. This was nothing compared to the freshness and accuracy of the rumors they could gather here, in a metropolis so close to the capital, where there were those who had actually been to the capital, had friends or family who worked there, or might even have lived there themselves. They would not be dealing in vague rumors, but tales of concrete, lived experiences, pertaining to specific incidents.

Indeed, this town would serve as a crucial source of information—and confirm for them what sort of intelligence they could hope to gather in the capital proper.

“Let another fierce battle begin!” said Pauline, as usual.

“You’re awfully fired up...” said Mavis with a grimace.

Mile, meanwhile, beamed to hear the two playing out one of the set exchanges from her fairy tales.

Perfect! I’m getting through to them. I’m cultivating the soil to plant the seeds of my future jokes throughout the whole world!

Her ambitions were boundless.

Little did she realize that it would be more of an uphill struggle than even world domination.

“Imperial capital, I’m home!” said Mile, predictably.

“But you’ve never been here before...” Reina interjected, in an equally typical fashion.

So far, the group had only been gathering information from the area surrounding the capital, but it was not as though they intended to do avoid the capital itself. In fact, their previous stops had all been en route to the capital, which was their true destination from the start.

It stood to reason that gathering information at the heart of the Empire would be most fruitful in terms of quantity, relevance, and accuracy...as well as how freely people might speak. And so, they had planned their route to lead to the capital.

The countryside was fairly insular, and the people who lived there tended to be guarded around outsiders. On the other hand, city dwellers were not excessively guarded, even with people they were not acquainted with. You might expect the opposite on the logic that city dwellers tended to have more distant relationships with their neighbors compared to countryfolk, but as long as you were a little friendly, the citizens of the capital tended to warm up to strangers quickly.

In her previous life, Mile had not coped especially well with the sort of people who would come barging into your private life merely because they lived close by, when you had nothing in common and nothing to talk about. She disliked gossips, who exaggerated and spread all kinds of rumors. Moreover, she could not understand the philosophies of countryfolk claimed that, “It’s foolish to lock your front doors when you go out—that’s as good as saying you don’t trust your neighbors!”

During her time as Misato, she had thought that all this was just silly. However, in her current life, Mile did not mind interacting with the simple rural folk of this world.

Still, the fact remained that she meshed far more easily with city dwellers.

At any rate, the Crimson Vow had arrived in the capital.

Because they were in the Empire, this was the *imperial* capital. There were no opera companies or combat revues, but nonetheless, “imperial capital” was the appropriate term.

“Um, so, where’s the Combat Revue...” asked Mile.

She was met with silence.

“Uh! I made sure to teach you about this reference in one of our previous folk tales...”

The other three utterly ignored Mile, who fell into despair.

This was unmistakably the climax of their journey. Though the merchants did not plan to end their journey here and immediately head back—instead making a wider detour to continue their information gathering—the capital was the key location in this mission.

Though this was merely a job the Crimson Vow had taken on, considering the guerilla warfare they had taken part in around Amroth and their experiences repelling the invading forces in Ascham, the Empire seemed like an opponent that the Vow was going to face again and again. As far as Mile was concerned, the Empire was also the mastermind behind the incident with the farmers that she had encountered on the way back from her fairy hunting expedition. It was only natural that their work felt personal.

The first order of business was to book an inn.

Again, calculations must be made and trade-offs considered. Merchants, who had come to make money, could not book especially expensive lodgings. Still, it would be unseemly to board the drivers and guards at a separate, cheaper inn, so the perfect establishment was not too expensive but also did not have especially seedy clientele. They were looking for the sort of place that might host the clientele with whom they would like to be speaking to... Even in a place as large as a capital, the number of inns that fell right in this sweet spot was fairly limited.

“Yes! Beast ears!!!”

At the inn they chose, Mile was especially overjoyed to find a beast-eared girl at the front desk. None of the other guests seemed to find this noteworthy, addressing the clerk normally.

“Seems like there’s even less discrimination against beastfolk here in the Empire than there is back in Tils...”

“Now that I think about it, in your folk tales, empires always seem to be terrible places full of human supremacists, Mile...”

“C-careful, don’t say anything rash!” Mavis scolded Pauline.

Pauline, however, was no idiot. She has spoken quietly, making sure that there was no one around to hear her. It was fine.

The group proceeded to their rooms, one of the merchants heading out to the local guildhall to inform them of their plans to set up shop the next day, while the remainder of the group rested in their respective chambers until dinner. The merchant who had gone to the guild was sure to be back before dinner as well.

“Everyone, I have a very upsetting announcement to make,” Mile said, as soon as the party had filtered into their own room.

“Huh?” Reina and Mavis tilted their heads in confusion, but Pauline’s expression turned sour, as though she could already predict what Mile was about to say.

“Despite all of our careful preparations, it seems we’ll be running out of merchandise soon.”

“What?”

“But we bought so much stuff!”

Reina and Mavis’s surprise was inevitable.

“Business was just much better than we imagined. Sharing some of our goods with the merchants had a bit of an effect on supplies as well. If we had run out

of goods on the way home, we could have just switched from selling things to stocking up, or focused on information gathering so as not to interfere with the merchants' sales. After all, it would be good for us to stock up on some Albarnian specialties. However, the capital itself is not a resource-rich place, so we can't do much buying here. There are certainly works of art and expensive industrial goods available, but this caravan doesn't really deal in those things. Plus, it'd be odd to pay relatively high prices to stock up on goods that we can get manufactured back at home, when we would have to carry them over long distances..."

The other three were silent.

"Wh-what do we do...?" asked Mavis, starting to grow flustered.

"I mean, we don't really need to do anything?" Mile shrugged, unbothered.

"Huh?"

Once again, Mile could as good as see the question marks floating above Reina and Mavis's heads.

"I mean, our job is to guard the merchants and their wagons and their merchandise. There's no reason that we actually need to be selling things ourselves."

"Oh!"

Apparently, at some point in the process, the pair had become convinced that making sales was their actual goal. Clearly, they had lost track of their priorities.

Though Pauline had by no means forgotten what their actual duty was, she was also the one of the four who most regretted this turn of events, and so her expression was dark.

"I suppose we miscalculated. Losing a business opportunity is the greatest shame for any true saleswoman..."

"Wait! Since when did the Crimson Vow become a merchant company?!?!"

Pauline was utterly hopeless.

“Huh? What of it?”

After dinner, the Crimson Vow gravely informed the merchants that they had only one day’s worth of their own stock remaining and were met with dumbfounded expressions.

“I mean, it was guard duty that we hired you all for in the first place. It was helpful to have some young ladies doing business nearby us to help attract customers, but that wasn’t something that we asked you to do, and we hadn’t planned for that kind of support in the first place, so...”

So, what are you so concerned about? The man didn’t say those exact words, but it was clear what he was thinking.

“You’re right!”

“I knew it.”

“I was pretty sure. It makes sense!”

“I mean, that’s what I was saying...”

Each member of the Crimson Vow tried to play the whole thing off, hoping to push the responsibility—or really, the role of “idiot who said something embarrassing” onto anyone but themselves. Mile was the only one who was being truthful. Even Pauline, who had already seemed to understand this implicitly, had pushed forward anyway, convincing herself that the whole thing was a mistake.

“Well, anyway, our shop will be closing down after tomorrow. After that, we’ll just be buying up anything good that we find on the way home. Which means that here in the capital, we will devote ourselves to protecting you,” Mile said to the merchants.

“Actually, I think we’ll be plenty safe in the capital, so you’re free to do whatever you like here until we leave.”

“Huh?” All four members of the Crimson Vow were perplexed.

“I’ve checked out the general conditions in the capital, and it seems like there haven’t been any notable disturbances of the peace. Whatever it is that the upper brass in this place might be thinking, it doesn’t seem to have had an

immense effect on the daily lives of the citizens yet. So, it doesn't seem like there will be any particular trouble for a foreign merchant who has made a proper report to the merchants' guild and sets up a stall in the city square.

"If we were out in a rural area, there might be some corrupt lord, restive locals, or general rabble who might make trouble, but no one would be stupid enough to bother some foreign merchants right in the middle of the city square, in front of temples and guard stations."

Sure enough, the square where they would be setting up shop seemed to be packed to the brim with temples, various government buildings, and guard stations. Letting a group of foreign merchants be attacked right in the middle of the capital would be a great embarrassment to the imperial government, which meant that the man was probably right that there was nothing to worry about for now.

"So, as a thanks for all of the extra help you all have given us thus far, for the next few days you all are free to do whatever you like in the capital."

"All right!"

When they thought about it, the Crimson Vow had to agree that it would be a sad state of affairs if some traveling merchants could not safely set up shop right in the middle of the imperial capital. If anyone were to try and start something with them, the guards and priests would be sure to leap to their aid, at the very least, for the sake of the region's reputation...

And so, the girls cheerfully accepted...

"Thanks so much!!"

They could hardly turn down an offer like this.

"Let's find a job!"

"Obviously!"

The members of the Crimson Vow were not hurting for money, but they had come all the way to a foreign land, and it was not a bad idea to take a job here to start establishing their reputation in this country as well.

Obviously, any jobs that would take them too far out of town to some faraway place—or involve accepting employment with other merchants—were out of the question. There was always the possibility of a sudden change of plans and the need for a swift departure, in which case, they could not risk getting injured or caught up in something strange and being unable to continue their guard duties.

Furthermore, they needed to remain reachable, on the off chance that the merchants suddenly needed them. No matter how confident they were in their safety, this was not something that a professional could overlook.

“If we’re looking for short-term jobs that’ll keep us in the capital, it’s mostly going to be the sort of things that G-rank children usually do,” Mile muttered, “or jobs for people who need quick manual labor. Moving things, loading and unloading, helping out businesses who are short-staffed. None of these would be the sort of jobs that—”

Reina giggled. “All that you and Mavis would be suited for *is* manual labor.”

“Wh...?”

Naturally, the pair seemed to object to this, but Reina handily ignored them. Of course, they were also teasing each other like this, so it wasn’t as though Mile and Mavis were truly angry. Besides, Reina wasn’t wrong...

“Well, let’s at least head to the guildhall and have a look at the board while we think about it. If there aren’t any good jobs, we’ll just kill some time sightseeing around the capital. There’s no need to take any jobs we aren’t interested in, anyway.”

Pauline’s suggestion was one they could all take to heart.

The next day, having sold out of most of their goods by the afternoon, the Crimson Vow pawned off the last dregs of their merchandise on the merchants and closed up shop. Giving their notice to the merchants, they headed off to the guildhall, where they discovered...

“There’s nothing good here,” Reina said. In truth, it would have been silly to expect otherwise. There was no way that any desirable, convenient jobs would

still be left this late in the day. That said, it was unclear whether or not such jobs would have existed in the first place—that is, jobs that could be completed within the city in a short time by a C-rank party, that would be both good experience and teach them more about the Empire.

“I don’t think there are any...” Mavis started.

“No, probably not,” added Pauline.

“There’s one!”

“What are you talking about?!?!”

The three of them looked at the job posting that Mile had pointed out...

Personal bodyguard. Short-term: Half day. 4 to 6 people. Payment: 10 gold. Requirements: C-rank or higher. Women only.

“Ah...”

Reina’s expression was skeptical. There were only two possible cases when it came to a guard job that was restricted to only female hunters.

Case 1: The person to be guarded was a young lady.

Case 2: The person to be guarded was a creepy old man.

So then, why had this request been left untouched?

Perhaps there were no all-female parties of four to six members. Perhaps everyone around had already been informed that this was an undesirable job. Perhaps it was not worth the pay (in terms of difficulty or danger). There were any number of reasons, really.

If the four of them took this job, they would be receiving only two and a half gold apiece. Assuming that this was just a simple matter of serving as an escort to ward off any local thugs, and that it would not take them out of the city, that was not a bad wage for a half-day’s work. That said, if it was a fairly difficult escort, where they could expect surprise attacks or assault by kidnappers, the pay was too little.

And, of course...

“Let’s find out more about this,” said Reina. The other three firmly nodded.

Obviously, the Crimson Vow were going to take the jobs. Interesting jobs, fishy jobs, “red mark” jobs...

“Whether in the pits of hell or the middle of the battlefield...”

“If you call out for us, we’re there in a flash!”

“We’ll smash through any danger or hardship and get the job done!”

“We’ll send any villains flying, even if they’re the ones paying us!”

“That is our...”

“Crimson Vow!!!”

All of the local hunters in the guildhall were thoroughly taken aback at this performance.

Chapter 88:

A Job in the Empire

“I see... So we’d be guarding a merchant’s family,” said Mile.

“Well, I guess any nobles would have their own retainers or personal troops, so they wouldn’t need to hire hunters. And normal commoners rarely have either the means or the reason to bother hiring a personal bodyguard,” added Pauline.

“I guess it’s inevitable that it would be a wealthy commoner, then—whether a merchant or some other influential person in town,” Mavis agreed.

It was true that there were some nobles who hired hunters as guards. There were cases where they encountered sudden dangers away from home or needed a temporary addition to their guard forces. On other occasions, they might need something specific: a female guard for their daughters, for example, or an escort who did not look like a guard at all. Indeed, these were just the sorts of demands that kept the Wonder Trio in business.

However, given that the one they would be guarding was not a noble, all that had nothing to do with the job in question.

“Yes. We are only able to reveal the name and details of the client to interested hunters after they have heard a preliminary explanation. Then, the details of the job itself will have to be delivered directly from the client,” the guild clerk explained. This was obvious. Of course, the guild could not go about blabbing the circumstances and movements of a merchant to someone who had not yet decided to take on the job. There was a chance that kind of carelessness might even lead to an attack of the kind the client was hoping to avoid in the first place.

“Understood. We have no issue with the general requirements of the job, so we’re interested. Please continue.”

The clerk looked rather relieved at Reina’s reply. There were very few parties who fit the listed requirements, and, as noted, the pay was not particularly

high. On top of this was the fact that guarding a merchant's family was far more tedious than escorting a caravan. Of course, it would be less boring if they were to encounter an attack, but fighting the sort of people who would attack someone with a guard escort was not worth the measly two and a half gold apiece on offer.

Thus, the job had been left untouched, but the period when escort was needed was swiftly approaching, and at this rate, it looked like it might be passed by without any takers. This was, of course, an issue for the client, and it looked quite bad for the guild.

In the case of something like a harvesting request from a merchant, usually it was not a huge issue if no one accepted the job—except in cases where it was a special medicinal herb that someone's life depended on or something else that was needed in a hurry. An escort job was typically more time sensitive; if there were no takers, the client would be unable to go forward with their plans or forced to do something risky without the benefit of a guard, so there could be human lives at stake. Therefore, it only stood to reason that the clerk was thrilled to find a party interested in this assignment.

Still, the Crimson Vow had not yet formally accepted the request. Hearing only the preliminary explanation, without any of the details, was only enough to determine that they should not rule the job out completely. There was still a chance that they might decline after hearing the rest. At the very least, being able to get someone qualified past the preliminary stage, and sending them to speak with the client, was a win for the guild. If the prospective applicants declined once they heard more of the details, that was on the client's head. Whether they explained the situation poorly, or whether there were unfavorable conditions in the job itself... At that point, it wasn't the guild's problem.

After conversing with the Crimson Vow, the guild clerk sent a messenger ahead and arranged the time and place for a meet-up. The Crimson Vow then headed to the designated location, where they were greeted by a trim-looking middle-aged man.

“Thank you so kindly for coming. I am Webdel of the Worrell Company, the one who issued this request. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“We’re the C-rank party, the Crimson Vow. We’ve come to hear more about the job.”

Mavis offered the man a formal greeting. At meetings like these, when an emphasis on the party’s “sincerity” was needed, Mavis was the obvious choice. Besides, she was, in fact, the Party Leader...

According to the merchant, a get-together had been set up with another merchant family for the sake of deepening the friendships between them. It was to take place on the riverbanks just outside the city gates, where they would play in the water, picnic together, and generally become better acquainted.

Apparently, they thought that eating somewhere outside of the restaurants in town and engaging in some family activities outside of their normal locations would help to strengthen mutual relations, as well as be a good experience for their children. In modern Japanese terms, it would likely be the equivalent of going camping with a friend’s family. Clearly, these merchants were not hurting for money, so it was not a bad idea to spend a bit of extra coin on deepening relationships and providing some cultivation for their children at the same time.

“Both of our companies deal in similar merchandise, so I suppose you could consider us rivals, but we consider work and private life to be separate affairs. Just because we’re enemies in the business world doesn’t mean that we have to detest one another as people. Professional competition aside, we are people of the same trade, after all, with the same worries and concerns.”

These merchants seemed to be fairly reasonable people.

This wasn’t the sort of activity for which a guard would normally be necessary. However, no matter how close they stayed to the capital, they were still venturing outside the gates, which meant that some amount of danger was likely. The other family had hired a guard as well, but apparently the notion had been put forth to hire some female hunters, so as not to frighten the girls by surrounding them with scary, craggy-faced men. Sir Webdel had agreed.

It made sense. Most hunters were coarse, crude, somewhat filthy, and smelly; not the sort of people you'd want to have nearby at a meeting such as this. It also made sense that each family had hired their own guards. Considering both the costs involved and the natural distrust that might exist as a result of their business dealings... No matter how friendly they might be outside of work, rivals were still rivals. It would be one thing if the merchants were the only ones involved, but where the safety of their wives and children was concerned, they couldn't risk it.

"That sounds fine. Once our job duties are complete, would it be all right for us to join in the meal? Naturally, we aren't asking you to let us eat your food—we'll cook our own meal to eat. We can provide all of the cookware and ingredients ourselves as well. But I'm assuming there won't be any reason for your guards to be standing around the whole time with swords and staves at the ready, right?"

"Of course. As long as you deal with any monsters or brigands that should happen to appear, that's all we ask. Though there's almost no chance of an attack like that in the first place..."

Obviously, it was not as though there was truly *no* chance of danger when one left the fortified walls of the capital, even if the merchant was right that it was quite unusual for such threats to appear right outside of the city walls. Moreover, if they had no guards, there was a chance of interference from small bands of ne'er-do-wells—even if actual bandits stayed far away. Having at least a minimal guard contingent was a way to deter even these lesser rabble-rousers from causing trouble. The Crimson Vow would essentially be bug repellant.

Hearing the merchant's reply to Reina's question, the members of the Crimson Vow grinned. Indeed, they were getting to kill two birds with one stone—both work *and* play.

"We will accept your request!" the four said as one.

There could be no other reply.

The next morning, the Crimson Vow joined the Worrell family in front of their shop and accompanied them to the meet-up site.

The merchant's party consisted of Worrell and his wife, along with their five young children—two boys and three girls—as well as several servants. Obviously, even if it was just an excursion for two merchant families, there would be more present than simply the families and their escorts. The family of the head of an influential mercantile firm would neither carry their own food and cookware to a site nor cook it once they got there. Therefore, they were accompanied by servants and maids, along with a head of staff in charge of managing the attendants. There could be no errors permitted in front of a fellow merchant's family, and it was clear they had brought their most experienced staff.

The group piled into three carriages and departed the capital through the rear gates, finally arriving at a riverbank a short distance away. The other family had already arrived, also in three carriages, and were currently unloading their supplies.

"So sorry to keep you, Mr. Galadle!"

"Goodness, no, we only just arrived. You are still here ahead of schedule!"

Sir Webdel disembarked his wagon and called out to the other merchant, one Sir Galadle. The other man was accompanied by his wife and children, some escorting hunters, and a contingent of servants as well.

As promised, the other hunters were another all-female party, a group of five women. They seemed to be older than the Crimson Vow, all in their late twenties to early thirties, based on their appearances. This was normal, of course—the posted request had specified a party of C-rank or higher, and it was unlikely that there was any C-rank party younger than the Crimson Vow.

As the two families greeted one another, the other party approached the Crimson Vow.

"You're the guards for that other merchant, yes? You're young! I haven't seen you all around before. Are you on a training journey? We're looking forward to spending the day with you. As it stands, this isn't formally a joint assignment, but let's try and get along!" said the woman who appeared to be the party leader.

"O-of course! Pleased to make your acquaintance!" Mavis swiftly replied, as

the other three members of the party bowed their heads in unison, showing a natural deference to their seniors.

With that, the woman retreated, without giving her own name or even the name of their party. Mavis had no chance to offer this information, either. Perhaps the woman had judged that there was no need to exchange such details. Given that this was not a joint assignment, it was unnecessary to brief one another about their battle styles or go over other logistics.

Mavis simply shrugged, deciding not to correct the woman's assumptions about them.

Meanwhile, both families' servants had begun setting up some outdoor tables and chairs, and arranging the dishes that had been prepared back at their mansions. Apparently, the plan was to dine first and then let the children play while the adults snacked and drank and talked. Naturally, the children would be expected to remain within view, and there were servants in charge of minding them.

At this point, there was nothing much for the Crimson Vow to do beyond observing the surrounding landscape. Should a battle erupt, this kind of preliminary scouting could prove crucial.

It was still a bit early to start preparing food. The Vow's own food preparations would be over swiftly, and it would look terrible if they were to begin eating before their employers...

"Huh...?"

Everyone on the riverbank looked agape at the tables, chairs, cooking table, three stoves, iron grates and kettles that came piling out of Mile's "storage." They were followed by meats and vegetables, seasonings, sauces, and a water cask.

One by one, the stoves were lit in a flash with Reina's magic. One of them had a kettle atop it, filled up about two-thirds with water magic. Then, Reina produced a fireball and submerged it into the water to bring it to a boil.

Shnkshkshkshkshk!

At the same time, Mavis diced meat with Mile's specially made cooking knife. Orc meat, venison, and other scraps. The vegetables had been stored already pre-washed and cut. Next to them were some sausages Mile had made, pickles, salad, and a few other dishes.

"St-storage magic..."

Naturally, that was the first thing that would catch a merchant's eye.

"And such a large capacity..."

The cask alone would weigh tens of kilos. Furthermore, these girls had far more than just food and seasonings. Once you factored in the table and chairs, three stoves, firewood, and more, you were looking at a weight in excess of 100 kilograms.

The merchants, their servants, and the other hunters were all stunned silent, their curiosity plain on their faces. Yet they were clearly aware of the hunters' taboos, and so they were bound to silence.

The members of the Crimson Vow had waited for their employers to take their seats before beginning their own meal prep. In a short while, their own food was finished, and they began to eat. Not wishing to forfeit their clients' safety, Mile was still keeping an eye out for threats via her surveillance magic. However, she did this quietly, without telling the other members of her party. It wouldn't do for them to think they could *always* rely on the convenience of her magic...

"Hey! Where'd she get all that stuff from?"

"That smells good..."

"I wanna eat *that!*"

No matter how much self-restraint the adults had, the same could not be said for the children. The offspring of both houses stood up from their seats, flocking around the Crimson Vow.

For a moment, both sets of parents' faces froze in dismay at their inability to stop the gathering of children from bombarding the Crimson Vow with questions. However, they were only young children, and the hunters were a

group of young ladies, half of whom appeared to be underage. It was unlikely, the parents reassured themselves, that the hunters would take offense at their children's natural curiosity. They were, of course, correct.

"Well, this is called 'storage magic.' It's a kind of magic that lets you carry lots of things around. Watch this!" Mile pulled a doll from her storage and handed it to one of the girls.

"And just why have you been carrying that thing around?" asked Reina, glaring at Mile.

"Huh? Isn't it every gentleman's habit to keep jerky and dolls on their person at all times in case they should come across a cat or young girl?"

"That's *horrifying*! Exactly what 'gentleman' are you referring to?!"

Mavis and Pauline could only watch this exchange, resigned.

"Whoa! Hey, Miss, how much stuff do you have in there?" asked one of the girls.

Mile, getting carried away, replied, "Hm, well? I could probably fit a hundred of your houses in there..."

At this wild exaggeration, the merchants forgot all of their nerves and began to grin.

"That's amazing! So what else do you have in there? I wanna see! Show us!"

"Hm? Really? Is it really that impressive? You wanna see?"

"Yeah!!!"

"Well then, I guess I have no choice! He he he he..."

Mile could never control herself in the face of a young girl's admiration. There was no time for Reina or Pauline to stop her from—

"Well then, here we go... *Hup!*"

Boom, bam, kaboom!!!

A massive tent, washroom, and stone outhouse appeared out of thin air.

"Waaah! That's so coool!!!" The children cried out in delight.

“What the heeeeeeeck?!?!?!” The adults could no longer hold back their disbelief.

The children immediately began to amuse themselves running in and out of the structures that had appeared, while the other members of the Crimson Vow’s shoulders slumped at having been unable to prevent this outcome.

“Hey, I want some of that,” said one little girl, pointing to the meat and vegetables and sausage grilling atop one grate.

“Coming right up!” Mile exclaimed, with all the gusto of a waiter at an izakaya, and loaded a plate full of grilled meat, vegetables, and sauce. Clearly, there was no way she could refuse a request from a little girl.

“It’s so good! This is *sooo* good!!!”

Seeing this, the other children crowded around Mile at once.

“Me, too!” said one boy.

“Me, three!” said one girl.

“Me, four!” chimed another lad.

Mile could not have been happier.

“Can we have some of this, too?” asked the first girl, pointing not to the barbecue but the food atop the table. It was filled with other dishes and desserts that Mile had prepared beforehand.

“Sweets, sweets, have some sweets!” said Mile, in a phrase one was certain one had heard somewhere before. The little girls dug into one dish after another.

Meanwhile, the first girl’s mother watched, agape, as her daughter gobbled down Mile’s creations. “Chelnet is so picky about her food and won’t eat vegetables, but she’s eating up every last bite...” the mother muttered to herself.

Meanwhile, the other hunting party appeared to be utterly petrified. They had not intended to eat during a job that would be over in just a few hours, and battling on a full stomach was dangerous, both because it slowed one’s movements and might exacerbate the effects of any gut injury. Wisely then,

they had not eaten before this job either. Now, they were stunned at how wonderful-smelling and delicious-looking the Crimson Vow's meal looked—and more importantly, at what an absurd amount of space Mile seemed to have in her storage. Naturally, the merchants and those who guarded them were of the same mind.

This was storage far outside the realm of common imagining.

The merchants' children, who had been given plenty of wonderful things to eat, were completely ignoring the dishes made by their own skilled chefs in favor of the foods prepared by these youthful hunters.

The parents had completely halted their conversation and sat in silence, but the children were still full of spirit, forgetting all their manners and chattering about the meal, their cheeks still stuffed full of food.

At this rate, it was impossible to say if this excursion had been a success or a failure...

Twitch.

Though she was surrounded by clinging, chattering children, and looked to be having the time of her life, Mile's expression suddenly sharpened.

She was still smiling, but her eyes were not. She instantly put away the food, the chairs, the table, the tent, and everything else, and told the startled children, "Go back over with your parents for a bit, okay?"

The children were all quite young, but they were not stupid. They had grown up watching their normally kind parents' faces grow severe when it came to talking business and seen their hardened expressions when they refused to back down from a deal. Thus, the bulk of them immediately picked up on Mile's sudden change in demeanor and the serious look in her eyes.

Ah! Something's going on...

Indeed, Mile's demeanor closely resembled that of their father's, whenever urgent news arrived during a quiet family moment. Experienced with such

things, the children only nodded in understanding, the older kids taking their younger siblings' hands and returning to their parents.

“Please prepare yourselves for battle!” Mile shouted to the other party.

The Crimson Vow still had no idea of these women's names, or even their party name. If they had accepted this job as a joint assignment, they would have made some self-introductions, or told one another about their specialties, or gone over plans for procedures during a battle situation, but in this case they had not done so. They were simply two parties hired by separate clients who happened to be in the same place at the same time. Had the members of the Crimson Vow asked, such a conversation might not have been out of the question, but the other party did not appear to be interested in this kind of collaboration, so they had left it alone.

Perhaps the others simply felt that there was no point in making any accommodations for a group of rookies, or else they assumed that there would be no credible threats right outside of the capital. They might encounter some jackalopes or a few local ruffians at most—but in this job, they didn't expect much more than that.

Judging by the fact that the Crimson Vow had ascended to C-rank at such a young age, and having seen Mile's absurd storage magic earlier, they likely assumed that it was on the merit of this magic that they had achieved their rank—which made them the sort of party valued more for their utility than their combat prowess.

Indeed, the value of a little girl who could carry several carts' worth of luggage would be incalculable for any merchant, high-ranking party, or even army platoon. Imagine how many people would flock around her, wishing to hire her and promising to protect her...

With that in mind, the other party rightly assumed, it did not matter how skilled she was in combat. It would not be surprising to see her on detail with a B-rank, or even an A-rank party. She was an immensely valuable little girl, both in terms of her rarity and usefulness.

So certain of this was the other party that they had already judged that the Crimson Vow's battle strength would be nothing to write home about.

However, seeing the confidence of Mile's warning, and thinking it best to obey the commands of a girl who could wield storage magic so handily, they raised no objections, swiftly taking their positions, weapons in hand.

Indeed, any hunter who could not work out what was going on at times like this would not live long.

"Everyone please huddle up and keep your backs to the river!" Mile said to the merchants and company as she took up a battle stance.

After a short pause, a group of around twenty men appeared. They had a crude, filthy appearance and were not wearing the sort of garments one would expect to see on anyone walking the streets of the capital. Their expressions were uncouth, and they wielded cheap swords, spears, and bows in hand.

Indeed, there could not be a more stereotypical group—these were bandits, with a capital "B."

That said, it was a truly rare occurrence to be attacked so close to the capital, especially given that they were not even part of a cargo-laden caravan. The only thing these men could be aiming for was a kidnapping.

However, the Crimson Vow cared little for the bandits' motives. All they had to do was get the job done. And so...

"Fall back! Get over here, and just protect *us*!"

"Huh...?"

The other party was bewildered to hear their employer's command. Similarly confused expressions appeared on the faces of the Webdel family, who had hired the Crimson Vow. And while the members of the Crimson Vow themselves held back their utterances of shock, the emotion was clear upon their faces.

"Wh-what...?" stammered Sir Webdel of the Worrell Company. He looked on in confusion as the members of the Dilabolt Company huddled together at their patriarch Sir Galadle's command.

"I hired you lot to protect *us*. That's what was in the job description. I will not

have you ignoring that to defend any unrelated parties. If you all leave our sides to try and protect anyone else, we *will* file a suit with the guild for your egregious nonfulfillment of contract in the face of an enemy!”

“Wha...?”

This was unthinkable.

The company of hunters hired by the Dilabolt Company looked shaken.

In times like this, it was only natural to combine the strengths of everyone present and work together to take down the enemy. What would be the point of purposely dividing the combat forces? From the looks of them, these bandits could be easily crushed by a combined effort.

The problem here was that what Sir Galadle was saying was not necessarily stuff and nonsense.

Had this been a joint job, the calls made by the one designated battle leader would take precedence over any other orders. Furthermore, in battle, the calls made by any of the hunters, rather than the client, would take all precedence, provided that all actions were taken for the sake of defending clients.

Yet here, Sir Galadle’s assertion that the other hunters would be in breach of contract if they did not prioritize the protection of his company was not entirely wrong.

If this were a joint job, and all of those they were meant to protect were currently present, then they could have easily ignored such a ridiculous command. However, this was not a joint job. When it came down to it, their employer was Sir Galadle, head of the Dilabolt Company, and their job was to defend the members of the Dilabolt Company—no more and no less.

The party leader was troubled.

They would be fine, of course. They had made their way to a C-rank, soon enough to rise to B-rank, and there were five of them. Even if they were to sustain some injury themselves, they would be plenty able to protect their employers, and they could at least keep up the fight long enough to kill or gravely injure enough of the bandits to send them packing. Surely, the bandits would not wish to see too many of their own men killed, so it was unlikely they

would keep fighting to the point of mutual destruction.

That said, it was peculiar that there would be an attack here in the first place, where there was little of value present, and there were guards around...

The main issue here was the other merchant family and their guards. They were young, unfamiliar faces. These young ladies, who had just risen to a C-rank due to special circumstances (namely, their party member's storage magic), had gotten carried away and set out on a journey that they were not yet skilled enough for, accepting a guard job that should have been relatively safe just to earn a bit of money for the road. They had just four members, presumably with modest battle skills. No matter how shabby these bandits might be, they would be helpless in the face of such numbers.

Still, it would be inappropriate for them to ignore the job they had accepted and break the terms of their contract in any way. It would be one thing if it merely delayed their promotion to B-rank, but if they were to put aside their obligation to protect their employer in the face of the enemy, there would likely be significant consequences. There was no telling whether the hunters' guild would take the extenuating circumstances into account, and they might see even harsher treatment from the merchants' guild. Would they have to risk their own futures for the sake of these strangers?

There was still one way to save the other party. They just needed to get them to come closer and join forces with them. Which would mean leaving *their* employers behind...

Or, they could surrender. It was an embarrassing thing for any hunter to do, but in the face of an overwhelmingly superior enemy, the right of a combat leader to issue a surrender would always be recognized. Even if they had been hired as guards, it was clearly absurd to compel anyone to fight to the death with such a disadvantage in numbers.

It was not as though the other merchants would lose their lives, anyway. The bandits would probably just make off with any valuables, and perhaps kidnap the girls. They were so close to the capital that the city guards would arrive soon, and there was no way that the bandits, trying to lead the girls away on foot, would be able to escape. It was possible they might even just take the

valuables and run. The others could see everything that was happening, so there was no point in killing the merchants and risking harsh punishments at the hands of the law.

As party leader, this hunter's job was to think not only of herself but of every member of their party. She agonized, unable to make the choice that she truly wished to make but knowing that she had few options.

"W-we are going to prioritize the job we were hired to do! Everyone, to the Dilabolts' side!"

"Wh...?"

For a moment, the other hunters' eyes went wide, as if in disbelief, but in times like this their leader's word was absolute. There were not enough lifetimes to pay for what would happen if they started a quarrel now.

Thus, they all swiftly followed orders.

I'm sorry...

Though they might wish to work as allies, in this moment, they were but two separate parties working for two separate clients. This was clearly foolish from a tactical standpoint, but given their contract, their client's word was their command. It was a tricky sort of order that even the guild would be hard-pressed to call faulty or outrageous. Furthermore, their choice was between their own futures and a group of young out-of-towners, who they had never seen before.

Perhaps she was making the wrong call here—perhaps even one she would regret for the rest of her life. Even so, there was no other choice she could make. She would bear this burden, and she would do so alone. The rest of them would simply have been following orders. This was her duty as a leader, after all...

"Huh?"

The veteran hunters were bewildered as they watched the bandits completely ignore the Dilabolts and head straight for the Worrell Company, guarded by the

young ladies.

It made sense, when the enemy was divided in two, to focus all your battle strength on the weaker half and wipe them out first. Yet normally, would they not start out with some kind of threatening demand, such as “Hand over your valuables!” or “Give us your girls!”? In this case, they said nothing, merely heading for the Crimson Vow and their clients with weapons drawn.

It was as though they were attacking with the intention of a slaughter... There was no money to be earned from that. Why...?

As the veteran hunters went pale, they heard a carefree, almost chipper, voice.

“Okay! Let’s do this!”

“All right!”

“Firebomb!”

“Flame Rondo!”

“Fire Shot!”

Kaboom!

Bwoom!

Fwooooo!

“Gyaaaaaaah!!!”



There was no issue with using magic here on the rocky edge of the river. And so, Reina, Pauline, and Mile had all chosen long-range fire spells of the type Reina normally specialized in. By the time the three spells struck simultaneously, Mavis had already covered more than half the distance to the men. As she continued running...

“Wind Edge!”

There was no way she would pass up the opportunity to show off her special skill on a stage as big as this one.

Mile swiftly caught up with her, sword in hand.

“No way! All four of them can use attack spells, including the sword fighters in the vanguard?” one of the veteran hunters asked in shock. By the time she finished speaking, Mavis and Mile had already jumped into the melee.

“Godspeed Blade!”

“Godshock Blade!”

Shunk!

Shink!

Thwunk!

Crack!

More projectile spells from Reina and Pauline struck.

Twenty seconds later, all twenty-ish bandits were writhing on the ground of the riverbank. About half of them were crispy and covered in burns.

“No way... Even though they were only fighting bandits, not soldiers or hunters, it’s remarkable to go up against those kinds of numbers and come out unscathed! And their opponents are only injured—no one is dead or missing any limbs or anything... Just how much of a difference in strength *was* there?!” The leader of the other party was utterly flabbergasted.

“We did it! What a huge haul! Not only are we gonna get paid for this job, there’s the reward for taking out these bandits, a bonus from the merchants’ guild, and a commission for the indenture of all these guys! What a day!” said Pauline, practically giddy, while Mavis beamed as all the civilians—women included—gushed over how gallant she was. She was especially pleased to have shown off how cool she could be in front of the children.

Mile quickly began pulling tables and food back out, while Reina menaced the bandits.

“So, not only did you attack these merchants, you attacked a group that included their children, here for a fun outing, as well as a guard contingent, huh? On top of that, you immediately went in for the kill, not demanding their money or trying to make off with their children... After they’ve finished questioning your boss and everyone involved, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were hanged. At best, you’ll be sold into the mines, where you’ll toil the rest of your lives, or else be used as human subjects for testing out healing spells...”

All of the fallen bandits who had still retained their consciousness shrieked.

“Y-y-y-you’ve got it all wrong! We ain’t bandits!!!”

“That’s what all bandits say,” Mile interjected coldly as she finished setting the table, watching the huddle of children out of the corner of her eye.

“N-no, it ain’t a lie! If you look into it, you’ll get it! We’re just... I guess you’d call us punks or thugs, but we’re just normal dudes!”

“Are you saying that punks and thugs are ‘normal dudes’?!” the Crimson Vow snapped back in perfect unison.

“Well then, I guess we just go contact the guards and have them come out. We’ll leave it for them to decide whether or not you all are bandits... However you might think of yourselves, that has nothing to do with what the investigation might turn up and whether they judge that your actions are those of legitimate bandits,” said Mavis.

The merchants nodded along with this...save for one portion of them.

As for the bandits, they were speechless, though they had no right to be so surprised. What exactly had they thought would be the result of committing

criminal actions?

“N-no, that’s—! We were just doing a job—”

“So, you accepted a job to attack a family picnic? That would mean that not only are you bandits, you’re also attempted murderers,” badgered Mile.

“And now you’ve confessed that you have an employer. You realize that any investigation is never going to end until you give up the name of that employer and the job you were hired to do. They might bring your friends and family in for questioning too, until they get to the bottom of this...” added Pauline.

“Wha...?! Our families have got nothin’ to do with this! M-my little sister, she just got married—”

Reina cut him off. “That’s none of our business. You’re the ones who did this, aren’t you? If you don’t want to cause trouble for your friends and family, then I suppose you have no choice but to hurry up and spill everything in order to make it clear that no one else you know is involved. You might start by telling us who the mastermind behind all this is—and precisely what it was that you were hired to do in the first place.”

At this, the bandits immediately began talking.

“We were just hired on by a black-market employment agency. So we’ve got no idea who the client is. We were told to dress up in these rags and act like bandits and attack one of these two families here that we were told was the target...”

“Huh?”

“Huh?!”

“Huuuuuh?!?!”

There was a sound of confusion from among the merchants.

It was obvious which of the two groups was the “target.” And it seemed significant that the “bandits” had been told to attack only one group, leaving the other alone.

The parties gathered at the riverbank fell silent as all eyes fell on Sir Galadle, head of the Dilabolt Company—including those of his wife and children.

“Uh, mm...”

If his expression had been one of speechlessness or confusion, he might still have had room to talk. However, the fact that he had gone pale and appeared to be slowly unraveling did him few favors. The jig was up. It would have been one thing if only the Worrells were looking at him with suspicion, but the horrified gazes of his own family and attendants were clearly too much to bear.

Reina ignored all of this, turning back to the bandits and asking, “Tell us clearly, what were you instructed to do when you attacked them?”

It was already too late to run. And so, hoping to lighten whatever sentence was coming for them, one of the bandits spoke up frankly.

“We were supposed to kill all of the merchant family, except the youngest girl. We were told to kill the older men among the servants and leave the women and younger men alone. And we were not supposed to harm the female hunters guarding them, with the exception of anyone who resisted.”

Silence fell once more.

It was far too easy to puzzle out what was going on here.

A young girl, left all alone after she lost her family in a bandit attack.

A fellow merchant family who had borne witness, in the same business, who were old family friends.

A business in shambles, left without its president and all its veteran staff, only a little girl remaining.

And furthermore, a merchant who had a number of sons, right around the same age as this girl.

The hunters who *just so happened* to be working during this attack would be able to give a testimony of everything.

“.....”

The silence dragged on.

The members of one of the merchant groups had gone red in the face, the other, utterly pale. A third group—the bandits—lay writhing on the ground, a

number of them moaning.

And then, Mile spoke up. “So, let’s get this picnic going again!”

“What are you talking abooooooooout?!?!”

There could be no other reply.

The Crimson Vow’s employers sent one of their attendants to fetch the city guard. The rest of the attendants tied up the bandits while Reina and Mavis kept lookout, and Pauline healed the most injured of them to keep anyone from dying.

Mile returned the plates that the children had already picked clean to her storage while throwing meat and vegetables onto the grill to replace them with new dishes.

Only the younger children were really able to eat. The smallest among them appeared to have no idea what was going on, but the older ones had some inkling and wore dark expressions. They looked after their younger siblings, all the while lamenting that this might be the last time they might ever get to spend with their friends. Until the guards came...

It was apparent that Galadle’s wife and children had no prior knowledge of his unscrupulous plan, so no harm would directly befall them, at least. That said, the company was another matter. If they were lucky, the children might still inherit. If not, his wife would probably have to take the children and return to their family home.

The other hunters had done a complete 180—rather than focusing on protecting their employer, they were watching him closely to make sure he did not escape. He might have been the one paying them, but if they had been hired in the name of criminal activity, that contract was now null and void. That said, they would still expect both their payment and bonus pay for breach of contract...

At some point, the members of the Crimson Vow realized that Sir Webdel, their client, was walking directly towards Sir Galadle. Mile left the tending of the barbecue to the older children and started in the same direction, while the

other party members left the oversight of the bandits to the attendants of the Worrell Company and made their way over, too.

“I-I don’t know anything about this! I’ve got nothing to do with those bandits!” Galadle wailed, pale in the face, but Sir Webdel merely shook his head.

“I’m not the one who’s going to be in charge of the investigation, so it’s pointless to say anything to me. I’m not going to listen. Please save all your claims of innocence for the guards who will be questioning you. I merely came here to inform you that our friendship dissolved the moment you insisted that the hunters only protect you, instead of joining forces in the fight, which was clearly a poor tactical decision. This is truly an unfortunate day,” he said, turning on his heel and returning to his family and staff.

Galadle could do nothing but sink to the ground.

“Come to think of it, why *did* that man insist on having only female hunters?” Mile wondered. “I mean, we heard it was so that the women and children wouldn’t be scared, but now that I think about it, I wonder if there wasn’t some other reason...”

“Well,” replied the leader of the other party, “it’s probably because we were the only all-female party of an upper C-rank or higher with our hands free currently present in the capital. All the rest are lower C-ranks, or even lower than that. Galadle had already hired us on beforehand, so that restricted the parties your client could hire to those of lesser experience. It would have caused a hitch in Galadle’s plans to have a more skilled escort team on the Worrell Company’s side. Who could have imagined that a party like you would appear in the capital and take on a job like this?”

Another member of the party spoke up. “We only accepted this job because we wanted to have a nice barbecue with some sweet little kids around, but you all... Are you B-ranks? Or perhaps even A? Or are you secretly a lot older, like half-dwarves? She might even be a half-elf, or—eep!” The woman swiftly corrected herself. “I-I’m sorry. I’ve been so incredibly rude!”

It was true. Never mind the taboo against prying into another hunter’s lineage—if the members of the Crimson Vow were what she supposed, then she had

been extremely brash in the face of her elders and superiors. It was no surprise that the color drained from her face.

However...

“Actually, we’re all pure-blooded humans—and still rookies. We’ve only been at C-rank for about a year. Though I suppose it might be about time to stop referring to ourselves as rookies at this point...”

The opposing party stared at them in silence, until...

“You’ve gotta be kidding us!!!”

“...So anyway, we wrapped up our first proper journey as a C-rank party, took some time off, and now we’re out on our first job after our break!” Mile finished her explanation, but the other party was still standing in silence.

It was more than disbelief. They did not *want* to believe it. Recognizing that it was possible for a “rookie” C-rank party like this to exist would shake their faith in the natural order of things.

They did not wish to recognize this fact. They simply *could* not!

“But here we are, right before your eyes, as you can see...”

The hunters slumped, their heads hung.

“Oh, that reminds me, we never did introduce ourselves. My apologies. In retrospect, it seems quite rude of us. We are the C-rank party, the Blue Gale. Most say we’ll be B-rank soon.”

“We’re the Crimson Vow, C-rank as well. As Mile just explained, it’s been about one year since we were promoted.” Mile had already given their name during her previous explanation, but as the party’s leader, Mavis bowed her head in official greeting and gave their names once more.

The two parties’ discussion continued until the guards finally arrived from the capital. Given their proximity to the city gates, and the number of people who were to be arrested, there were quite a few of them. Indeed, there were not

only guards present but some who appeared to be hunters or soldiers as well.

While the guards first moved to apprehend the bandits, these others approached the Crimson Vow and company.

“I’m Orvin, the assistant guild master. I must apologize, for it seems you fell into a trap of a job. We’ll be taking care of everything from here, so I simply ask your patience, and I hope you won’t be too angry at the way events have unfolded.”

Apparently, Sir Webdel had sent word not just to the guards but to the guild as well... This was probably a great help to the Blue Gale, who would receive not only their payment that had already been deposited with the guild but extra for breach of contract. They might even be able to squeeze an apology fee out of the guild itself. Sir Webdel was quite the prudent merchant to try and appease a group of hunters who were not even in his employ.

The Crimson Vow, meanwhile, were just fine. They had been under no illusions about either their employer or the job they had been hired to do, and even though some assailants and their mastermind had been present, everything that had come to pass was within the bounds of their escort duties. Of course, they would probably still receive some additional compensation from the guild. They had been caught up in the midst of a heinous crime, in the course of a job that the guild had brokered, so it would be bad for the guild branch’s reputation if they didn’t do everything they could to smooth things over.

At the guards’ direction, the captured bandits, Galadle, and his attendants all began to walk in the direction of the capital. Though the attendants had not been formally captured, they were surrounded by guards, who would keep them from any attempt at flight. Galadle’s wife and children, who appeared not to have been involved in the plan, walked along more freely.

The Crimson Vow—along with their employer, his upper ranking attendants, and the Blue Gale—followed behind so that they could give their eyewitness testimony. Meanwhile, the other staff of the Worrell Company would remain behind to start breaking down the site.

The Webdel children watched sadly from afar as their friends slowly grew more and more distant. With luck, perhaps they would one day meet again in the world of commerce...

“Thank you so much for everything. If we had hired a different party as our guards, then right now we might be...”

Sir Webdel trailed off, not wanting to state the obvious. It was clear that his thanks came from the bottom of his heart, and so the Crimson Vow simply accepted his kind words, not bothering to demur out of humility. The manners of Japanese people aside, in other countries (fantasy worlds included), it is considered foolish to belittle your own accomplishments, so even Mile behaved accordingly. If nothing else, it would be troublesome for other hunters if the Crimson Vow downplayed the value of good work. It was important to maintain market standards.

Besides, even if their employer was truly thankful, that did not mean that he intended to give them a bonus. Thanks were free to give, no matter how lavishly... In this way, Sir Webdel was truly a skilled merchant.

Still, he had given them an A-grade on their job completion report, so the members of the Crimson Vow were not unsatisfied. Even Pauline seemed plenty pleased with the extra funds they were getting as a reward for turning in the bandits—and the commission on their criminal indenture.

And so, the incident drew to a close. The assistant guild master had already been present when they gave their testimony and witness account at the guard headquarters, so all they had to do was give their job completion report and receive their pay. The only question that remained was simply how much of an apology fee they might receive from the guild...

“Well, then...” said Mavis.

“Thank you for your request!” all four chorused in their usual ritual.

Just as they moved to leave the Worrell Company behind, Sir Webdel called out to them, “Please wait!”

They stopped, wondering what he might want now.

“Could I convince you to accept another job? I’d like it if you could use your storage magic to transport some things to a place four days’ carriage ride from here, and—”

“No, thank you.” Mavis replied before the man could even finish speaking.

“Wh...?”

Sir Webdel was stunned to hear his request so quickly denied.

“There are two reasons for our refusal,” Mavis explained. “First off, we are only free until tomorrow. And furthermore, we are C-rank hunters. A C-rank hunter might take on an escort job, but simply serving as pack mules is not within our job description. If you’d like to hire some movers, you should look for some E-ranks or lower—or perhaps head to one of the moving companies on roll with the merchants’ guild, or contact an employment agency. Now then, if you’ll excuse us...”

As she implied, E-rank or lower hunters truly would do anything, from serving as porters to carry a party’s luggage, to doing odd jobs, acting as underlings, and more. If they wanted to eat, they could not afford to be choosy about work. However, no hunter would ever do something so menial once they had achieved a C-rank or higher.

For a full-fledged hunter to do a job like that would be as good as stealing the food from the mouths of brand-new guild recruits, often less than ten years old. No matter how hard up they were for money, no hunter could possibly bear such shame.

As such, these sorts of jobs were best issued to low-ranking hunters, or else left for those with no combat abilities outside of the hunters’ guild all together.

Of course, it would be a different story if they had been asked to guard a transport caravan, and the client had inquired if Mile might carry some additional items or valuables in her storage. In fact, Mile had done this multiple times in the past. However, if the job itself was only transporting goods, then the Crimson Vow, a C-rank party, could not accept it—something that was especially true for Mavis and Reina, who valued their reputation and pride highly.

“Ah...”

Sir Webdel realized his misstep, but it was already too late. Even if he were to attempt to reframe the job as a guard duty, the Crimson Vow would never be party to it. And yet, as they attempted to leave, he asked them once more, “Please wait!”

“You can ask us all you like, but we aren’t going to accept your job. As I said, we’ve already got an engagement that begins the day after tomorrow,” said Mavis. Still, Sir Webdel was not ready to give up.

“N-no, I’m not worried about that anymore! I have a new request to make of you.”

“A new request, you say...?”

She could not help but at least listen. Even if he had not formally issued the job through the guild, it would reflect badly on all hunters if they did not at least hear his proposal. Furthermore, they had nothing to lose by simply listening. If the conditions did not suit them, they could simply refuse again. Besides, their schedule was tight enough that they probably wouldn’t be able to help him even if they wanted to. And so...

“Go ahead. We will listen to your request,” said Mavis.

Sir Webdel turned to Mile. “I’d like for you to provide some meals for my family tomorrow, along with their recipes, if possible. Thanks to what became of our carefully planned outing, a nice day out for my children was ruined. Now, they’ll be separated from Sir Galadle’s children, of whom they were all quite fond... So, tomorrow, I’d like to arrange a do-over... Thankfully, Sir Galadle’s family had nothing to do with any of this, and they haven’t been taken into custody. Still, there’s no doubt they have a long, hard road ahead of them, and I’d like to give them at least one final enjoyable memory before the moving and reorganizing and rebuilding begins.”

“.....”

A request like this was hard to decline. It presented no conflict in terms of their schedule, and the duties of the job itself were no trouble either, as it was a direct request based on a special skill of Mile’s.

In trust, Sir Galadle's previous request—which had also been predicated on a special skill of Mile's—had not been so different from this one. However, if they had accepted a job like that, all that would have gotten around was the fact that a C-rank party had taken a transport job, rather than an escort request. A job like this was not so bad for the Crimson Vow's pride or dignity.

Still, this request was also less a job for the hunting party the Crimson Vow and more a job for Mile herself. Which meant that it was not the sort of thing that Mavis could make a decision about on her own, as party leader. Thinking this, Mavis puzzled over her reply. Until...

"We accept!" cried a gleeful Mile. "We'll happily do it for the sake of the children."

"You really just want to play with those kids again, don't you?"

"You didn't get enough of them, after everything that happened?"

"You want a do-over, so you can get some more..."

The other three members of the Crimson Vow could well understand Mile's enthusiasm. But in truth, they had no objections themselves either. Thus, the job was accepted.

"Well, given the details, it doesn't seem like we would get a lot of contribution points from the guild for this task. We can leave this as an independent job. However, in exchange, we'd like payment up front."

Normally, upfront payment consisted of no more than half the total, but Reina, knowing that they had the advantage here, was proposing that Sir Galadle offer up the full sum. The man agreed without a second thought, drafting up a contract on the spot. After all, this was something that the man wanted very badly to happen, and not only did he trust the Crimson Vow, but they had saved his life and those of his family members.

"Mile, do you have enough food stored up? If you don't need to do any extra prep..."

On their way out of the Worrell Company offices, the members of the

Crimson Vow were talking among themselves when they were suddenly greeted by the leader of the Blue Gale.

“Huh? Did you need something else from us?”

The questioning of the hunters regarding the incident had already been completed. Afterward, the two parties had quietly parted ways after sharing a bit of intel and gossip. So what could the party leader want now—and why was she standing here all alone?

“I apologize. There’s something I wanted to say to you all...” she said, turning to Mavis. “First, I want to thank you for everything. I nearly did something I might have regretted for the rest of my life, but you all saved me. I truly must thank you...”

She had already thanked them plenty back at the guild. However, it was probably difficult to speak her mind fully in front of her other party members, knowing that to do so was to take all their guilt onto her own shoulders.

The leader bowed her head to them, but Mavis frantically waved her off. It wasn’t right for her to lower herself to a party so much younger and less experienced.

“Anyway,” the leader continued, “my thanks aside, I have a question for you girls. The order that we received from our employer in that moment—if you had been in our shoes, what would you have done? I’m dying to know.”

At this, Mavis replied without a moment’s hesitation.

“Obviously, we would have protected our client. That is our job, as stipulated in our contract.”

“I see...”

The leader of the Blue Gale looked relieved, though there was another emotion on her face that was harder to place.

“Of course, while we left Reina and Pauline to act as our client’s bodyguards, Mile and I would go for the enemy, counting on them to fortify the area from a distance. We’d move in a direct line, from the client to the enemy—which wouldn’t contradict the need to only protect the client, right?”

“Huh?”

The leader was speechless.

“Then, we would eliminate the enemy—without letting them harm a single hair on the client’s head. And if they wished to complain about that, they could take it up with the guild,” Mavis added, grinning.

As a matter of fact, this was exactly what the Crimson Vow had done during the incident. Mavis was not boasting about something that was beyond their abilities but casually stating the fact of what they might do, as though it were no big deal.

The leader of the Blue Gale was lost for words, but she had no choice but to accept the Crimson Vow’s explanation.



“Well then, what if there were *fifty* bandits?!”

“We would leave Reina and Pauline behind to act as the client’s bodyguards. Mile and I would go for the enemy, counting on them to fortify the area from a distance—”

“Sorry to bother you.”

Sensing that she could not hope to get any useful information out of these girls, the leader headed home, dragging her feet the whole way.

“Finally! I got to talk for myself and give some leader-like advice instead of Reina! I was pretty cool, wasn’t I?” Mavis innocently rejoiced.

The other three, silent, regarded her with lukewarm expressions.

The next morning, another luncheon was held, this time in the courtyard of the Worrell Company home. Worried that the children might be frightened so soon after the attack, they had settled on a more contained event, safely within the city walls. The scenery was not as appealing, but the area was at least plenty spacious.

The participants this time, besides the children of both houses, were Sir Webdel, his wife, Galadle’s wife, the Crimson Vow, and three chefs. The rest of the household staff was not present.

Of course, the food was all provided by the Crimson Vow, so the chefs would not be doing any cooking. Instead, they were present in order to carefully observe Mile’s cooking technique and take notes for the future.

As it happened, the chefs had grown rather depressed the previous day upon seeing how much of their food had been brought back home untouched. The adults had tried to comfort them, telling them that the event had merely had to conclude before everyone could get back to the meal, but the children were far more brutal. They could not stop talking about all the delicious food they had eaten...foods prepared by Mile.

Although Sir Webdel had requested that Mile provide her recipes, she was

more of an intuitive cook, which meant that she rarely committed every single step of her cooking process to memory and found it a pain to write such things down. Thus, the contract had been written with the provision that Webdel's chefs would watch and learn as Mile made her preparations.

As Mile saw it, cooking was something that differed greatly each time based on the circumstances. Particularly in this world, even something like "high" or "low" heat varied based on the size and efficiency of the stove, the firewood, and the chef's own judgment. Thus, there was no way to write a truly accurate recipe.

Moreover, while Mile had no reservations about giving away her recipes for free—thinking that if delicious cooking started spreading in this world, then one day she too would get to benefit—her fellow party members had forbidden her from giving away her recipes to just anyone. Pauline had admonished her to consider food safety, for example, in the case of the dishes she made with raw eggs—such as mayonnaise, egg rice, sukiyaki, and so forth. "These are fine for you, Mile, with your special storage and the magic you use to process stuff when you're cooking, but if normal people tried to do the same thing, people would get sick!"

In this case, Mile figured that no one could fault her for recipes that they had written themselves—so she decided to simply let them watch her in action. If they tried to replicate her results, anything that happened afterward would be their own fault.

The luncheon was now underway. However, the circumstances weighed too heavily on the hearts of the older children for them to truly have fun—even with such a delicious menu. Still, as they watched the younger children, blissfully ignorant, having their time of their lives, smiles gradually began to come to the faces of the older children as well, and they seemed to realize that they ought to enjoy these final moments with their friends while they had the opportunity.

Knowing that her cooking had played some small part in this, a slight smile drifted across Mile's face...

“Big Sis! Some karaage! Make some karaage!”

“On it! Let’s make some karaage, everyone! Ah, Sir Webdel’s chefs, please come here and watch this so you can remember it for later!” said Mile, starting to explain the cooking process.

She pulled some meat from her inventory. “I take the fresh rock lizard meat, then cut it up...” She swiftly chopped the meat and laid it on a plate. “Make the secret sauce and apply some magical pressure to force it into the meat...” She drew the liquid from the pot and mumbled some kind of spell. “Mix together the spices that I’ve picked up from different countries to make the secret karaage spice powder...” She drew a strange powder from her inventory and sprinkled it over the meat. “Then I use some shielding magic and circulate hot air at a temperature of 180 degrees all around the meat for exactly twelve-and-a-half minutes! Now, I’m sure it’s boring to wait, so here’s some that I prepared beforehand...”

With that, she pulled out a plate of freshly made, piping hot karaage. The batch she was currently making could be stored away and taken out when everyone was ready for seconds.

“Whoa, that’s amazing!”

“You’re so good at this, Big Sis! I knew it!”

Mile looked as though she were about to melt from hearing the children’s earnest praise.

“Ha!”

“What happened to that wistful look she had when she picked up on how sad the older children were?!”

“Well, that’s Mile for you...”

Meanwhile, the three chefs who had been hoping to master Mile’s craft merely looked on silently, their eyes like those of dead fish.

“There’s no way we could do thaaaat!” one of the chefs shouted.

“We figured,” shrugged the other members of the Crimson Vow.

That was when the youngest of the chefs piped up. “I mean, it’s probably

possible to replicate these cooking techniques with other methods. The marinade at least is one thing, but she called that spice blend a secret, so I'm not sure..."

This chef, at least, seemed certain that this was not an impossible task, something that could be achieved only by magical methods.

Yes, this is how a chef should be! Even in the face of difficulty, they keep on fighting, undeterred! Maybe there is some hope for the future. Time to do them a little favor in hope of seeing even more gourmet dishes discovered! thought Mile.

She decided to share her secret and tell the chefs the ingredients of her spice powder. It involved nothing that was easily perishable, so there could be no worry of *that* causing food poisoning.

"Well, so, for the spice powder, it's made up of wheat flour, starch, salt, garlic powder, onion powder, paprika for coloring, yeast powder, some experimental amino-acid-type flavoring, baking powder, emulsifier, powdered soy sauce (also experimental), dextrose, sugar, black pepper..."

By the middle of her list, even the young chef's face had soured, and by the end, all three of them had collapsed to the ground, cradling their knees.

"Ingredients I've never heard of, rare and expensive ingredients, and black pepper... You'd be hard pressed to even find that at a king's table! There's no way I could..."

After the karaage, Mile made ice cream using both refrigerating and churning spells, along with other various sweets that could not possibly be recreated by normal cooks. She used her magic to magically melt granulated sugar, surrounded it with a magical barrier filled with countless tiny holes, and spun it out into thin threads to make cotton candy.

"Typically you just rotate this, and it's extruded by centrifugal force, but using both kinds of magic together is a bother, so this time I just used straight pressure."

Snap!

Mile had broken them.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow stared pityingly at the young chef, whose sanity appeared to just have snapped in two. Even Sir Webdel's shoulders slumped, seeing all these dishes that his chefs would never ever be able to replicate.

Naturally, Mile had not set out to torment anyone or break their hearts, so afterward she taught the chefs a number of dishes that *could* be replicated without magic. After all, this had been at least part of her job description, so she could not overlook it entirely.

After the cooking was done, and the members of the Crimson Vow were taking a break from the children, Sir Webdel approached them, a forlorn look upon his face.

"How could Galadle be so stupid?" he wondered aloud. "If he felt he had no other choice, he should have just talked to me... Though I guess hindsight is 20/20."

Webdel sighed, continuing, "I suppose he thought it better to cut down a friend's household from a position of safety than gamble to save his own family and employees. You'd think that a dealer of military supplies would be able to make a killing with war on the horizon, but and all the good contracts have been monopolized by larger companies, relegating us mid-sized operations to subcontractor status. And when it's those mid-range companies who turn on you without a moment's notice as soon as the going gets tough... Still, Galadle was probably under some pressure from the higher-ups. Pressure that made him feel he had no choice but to destroy or absorb the Worrell Company."

In fact, Galadle had been asked at the hearing the previous day why he would have devised such a scheme. (Really, what in the world would the guards have even been investigating, if not that?) Naturally, both Sir Webdel and the Crimson Vow had been present at this hearing.

According to Galadle himself, it had gone something like this:

Both the Dilabolt Company, headed by Galadle, and the Worrell Company,

headed by Sir Webdel, dealt in the same variety of goods: chiefly easily preserved food supplies, seasonings, and other comestibles indispensable to daily life. These were the so-called military supplies, or munitions—the sort of supplies that would be transported to the front lines in a military campaign.

On modern-day Earth, “military supplies” and “munitions” typically referred to things like weaponry, armor, and ammunition, but in a world without guns and cannons, these terms mostly just meant provisions—things like wheat, salt, sugar, alcohol, sweets, salted goods, *etc.*

When troops were dispatched to other countries, the importance of these goods rose, their scarcity and value skyrocketing. Therefore, some of the larger companies had begun colluding with politicians and the military, hoping to monopolize these trades to their own benefit.

For certain people, this had its merits. Merits such as immense profits for one portion of the population, in exchange for driving most people into poverty and jeopardizing the well-being of the country as a whole. Others, meanwhile, were entirely opposed. It would be one thing if necessity forced the government to temporarily take control of one of these industries for the sake of the war effort. However, using war as an excuse to take over a wide range of supply chains for an indeterminate period would have negative repercussions on the country’s economic future, which in turn, would cause people to suffer.

And so, even as certain larger merchants, political masterminds, and their cronies began to pull strings, others made efforts to voice objections. As it stood, Galadle’s company, Dilabolt, had ties to the former faction, while Sir Webdel’s company, Worrell, had ties to the latter.

Even the controlling, monopolistic factions were not necessarily reviled by all. The first faction had its supporters, particularly among the upper brass of the military and national government. These people were no traitors. Many of them were patriots in their own way, fighting for the continued existence and development of their nation, along with prosperity for their own flesh and blood. And even though some of the more audacious advocates of such market monopolies had been known to prey on the resources of the common folk and turn a profit at their expense, there were still plenty of those commoners who supported with this monopolization of supplies, thinking it for the good of their

country and the war effort.

That said, it would seem that there was a very small portion of this faction who did indeed cross lines that should never be crossed. These were not even money-hungry corporations who would commit any atrocity for the sake of bolstering their ledgers, but mid-range merchants, who were in charge of distributing supplies to the front lines. Through various machinations, these merchants grew by eliminating anyone who did not agree with them.

Galadle had probably been backed into a corner. It was easy to imagine him getting caught up in something out of his league. Or perhaps coming across some information that was meant to be secret...

He would have been in big trouble.

If he'd been willing to go to such extreme lengths, he must have had no other choice to protect himself, his family, and employees. No matter how long he had been friends with Sir Webdel, if his own family's well-being was at stake...

Even Sir Webdel would acknowledge that, if his own wife and children had a blade held to their necks, he could not say for certain that he would not have betrayed Galadle to save them.

"I can't deem him a truly evil person. We all have beliefs, allegiances, obligations, and even people who we would give anything to protect. Despite everything that's happened now, I can't forget those early days—back when we had first inherited our companies from our fathers, when we shared our worries and talked, and drank together..." Sir Webdel trailed off, hanging his head.

Galadle had confessed everything with candor at the hearing the day prior. Clamming up would have caused more trouble for his family and employees down the road, leaving him no choice but to tell the whole truth. And indeed, it seemed all the blame had fallen squarely on the shoulders of Galadle himself, leaving his business, his family, and his employees unscathed...though it was still too soon to say what the government's final verdict would be.

It was possible that the specifics of this incident would make their way up the chain and others would be brought to justice, but either way, that had nothing to do with the Crimson Vow. At the end of the day, there was no telling if this would have any impact on their home Kingdom of Tils, and even if it did, they

had no intention of involving themselves in such matters.

For now, all they could do was pray that Galadle's children would not face too much hardship going forward.

Sir Webdel was probably hoping that Galadle's wife and children could take over the Dilabolt Company. As did Reina and Pauline, who had both lost their own merchant fathers...

The Crimson Vow were of course under no obligation to be gathering intelligence. After all, it was not part of their job duties. However, they believed that if they had the opportunity to learn anything that might be of use to their employer, it was only right of them to do what they could. Therefore, they listened silently as Sir Webdel spoke.

In truth, this was probably not the sort of thing that Sir Webdel should be talking about. It was only out of a consideration for his fragile emotional state that they allowed him to continue to ramble.

Even if this was by no means classified information, was it really a good idea for him to be nattering on about such topics in front of traveling foreigners? Though, he really hadn't shared anything that went too far beyond common sense...

As if reading the party's minds, Sir Webdel gave a wry smile. "Of course, even for all this talk of conflicts and impending war, I don't think that there are really any current plans to invade other countries."

"Whaaat?!"

This was incredibly important information.

To think that *they* would be able to obtain such intelligence in a place like *this*! The members of the Crimson Vow were speechless.

"I-If there's no invasion being planned, then does that mean it's a civil war? Like a battle over the succession of the throne, or a usurpation, or one of the regional leaders rebelling and making a play for independence?"

The Empire was incredibly vast, and the mountains were both towering and

expansive. It would not be at all surprising for some frontier earl out on the outskirts, far from the capital, to mount a revolution. In territories like these, even those who carried titles like earl might actually have influence more akin to that of a marquis or even beyond that. Therefore, it was quite likely that a war might develop this way, even without the involvement of another country.

Pauline's question had been a reasonable one. However...

"Wha—?! Wh-wh-wh—"

Sir Webdel looked suddenly frazzled. He took a swift glance around them. Seeing that no one else had been listening, he let loose a sigh of relief and hissed, *"Don't say things like that!"*

The members of the Crimson Vow were taken aback at Sir Webdel's sudden outcry. After all, he himself had been the one to broach the subject in the first place. That said, on reflection it would not look good for him if it got out that he was talking about things like wars of succession around both foreigners and the family of a criminal. To do so was to risk suffering an even greater tragedy than the execution currently awaiting Galadle.

If you didn't want us to talk about it, then you shouldn't have brought the topic up in the first place!!! the Crimson Vow thought to themselves. However, they put this objection aside out of maidenly good manners, and instead, continued the conversation in the hope of learning more.

"So, what sort of enemy are we talking?"

The Crimson Vow was inclined to believe him. After all, it seemed he had no reason to hide the truth—other than, perhaps, fear of eavesdroppers.

"I-It's not really a secret or anything," Sir Webdel began. "That said, it isn't widely advertised, and it isn't the sort of information that would get around on its own, as there aren't a lot of people who know about it, and it rarely comes up at all amongst the commoners..."

And so, he began to explain.

"A war with the demi-humans?" the girls cried in unison.

Demi-humans.

These, of course, were the beastfolk and demons, who despite sharing a similar appearance with and having the ability to converse easily with humanoids—humans, dwarves, and elves—were thought of as different species entirely. As a result, they had long been subject to significant discrimination, persecution, and even murder. Yet most did not consider it in those terms. Killing a demi-human was considered to be the same as killing monsters or wild beasts.

When a human kicks a stray dog, is that considered *discrimination*? Animal rights activists would probably have a thing or two to say about this, but most of us would not use that word. Even if someone kicked a dog to death, they would never be called a *murderer*...

That said, while there had been a time when demi-humans were frequently hunted, killed, and enslaved, currently they shared equal rights with humanoids and were on at least relatively equal terms. In most parts of the world, relations were somewhat strained, but mostly amicable...as long as neither side managed to let the deeply rooted prejudices that lay dormant in their hearts come rising up to the surface.

“But beastfolk and demons all live in individual tribes, right?” Mile asked. “They haven’t established a nation or anything, so...”

Sir Webdel nodded. “I did tell you previously that there were no plans to invade any other *country*, per se. Our enemies are the demi-humans settled within our own lands. More specifically, the demons and beastfolk—as well as any half-or quarter-humanoids mixed with them, who operate alongside them. As you correctly pointed out, Miss Mile, these demi-humans only congregate in settlements of individual tribes, so our current quarrel is just with a small portion of the demi-humans who have set up colonies within our lands...at present.”

“At present?” Pauline asked.

Mile, who seemed to have grasped the situation, replied. “In other words, that’s the case for now. But based on how this battle goes, it might lead to demi-human totalitarianism, and war might spread throughout this whole

country—across the continent even. Just like in those Great Demi-Human Wars we learned about at prep school...”

The Great Demi-Human Wars had spanned the continent, pitting the humanoid races—humans, elves, and dwarves—against the demons, beastfolk, and their allies, which included the fairies and various others who leant their strength to the demi-human cause.

When it came to head-on battles, the humanoid forces fought valiantly, but the demons and beastfolk had the overwhelming advantage in terms of individual battle power. Additionally, there was no way that the humanoids could keep up with their opponents in surprise attacks or smaller skirmishes in the forests and mountains—where the demi-humans had the advantage of sharp night vision and overwhelming physical strength.

Thus, the humanoids were unable to enter the mountains or forests, and could not assure their safety in the open plains without a vast number of soldiers.

In other words, they were trapped inside their own citadels. The farmers, the huntsmen, the smiths...and even the merchants.

Furthermore, the humanoid alliance’s attempts to burn down the demi-humans’ forest strongholds had angered the elder dragons, who then allied themselves with the demi-humans, resulting in the destruction of many humanoid towns.

At that point, it was checkmate for the humanoids.

Despite their advantage in terms of sheer numbers, the humanoids were forced to concede to a large-scale compromise. Henceforth, the demi-humans would be accepted in society on equal terms and recognized as having equal rights with the humanoids. Though some mutual enmity remained, both sides wished to avoid further conflict, which meant that any foolish actions that might have served to fan the flames of war were severely punished. This way, the current tentative peace was maintained. And yet, it was a fragile mockery of true peace and might be shattered by the slightest foul wind...

“Is it just me, or is this a big deal?”

“This is probably a big deal...”

“This seems like a big deal.”

“For sure!”

Chapter 89:

A Defensive Battle

“BUT IF YOU DO SOMETHING that stupid, isn’t that just going to prompt a war with someone else?! Even if you temporarily beat down these colonies of demi-humans—never mind the other clans settled inside the country—you’re going to get demi-humans rushing in from the surrounding countries, and maybe even humanoid armies from other nations, wanting to defend the ancient treaties and prevent having a demi-human war spread across the continent. Plus, the elder dragons have formed their own pacts, and if they get angry as well... This is suicidal! And then, despite everything going on *here*, the Empire wanted to start messing around in the Kingdom of Brandel? What the heck are you all thinking?” Mile raved.

Sir Webdel shrugged his shoulders, a troubled look upon his face.

“I mean, from what I’ve heard, it sounds like the demi-humans were the ones who picked this particular fight... Very recently, at that. So really, this is an emergency change of plans, to halt the, er, preparations that were being made regarding other countries...”

“Whaaat?!”

It was clear that Sir Webdel was mincing his words in order to avoid saying anything like “aggressive” or “invasion.”

Typically, it was the humans who went after demi-human settlements, looking to claim some fertile lands or rare treasure. It was uncommon for their fellow humanoids, the elves and dwarves, to get involved in conflicts of this type. Perhaps because their birth rates were so low, owing to their longevity, they had little interest in expanding their territories and instead prioritized the protection of their current settlements, which meant they were not so fond of war...

Demi-humans mounting a war effort was as good as unprecedented. It really only happened in exceptional cases, and often as not, it turned out that humans

were the root cause—forcing demi-humans to take action when their people were snatched by slavers, treasures stolen from their clan, or their kin killed by invaders.

Thus, the members of the Crimson Vow were quick to conclude that the people of the Empire must have committed some truly heinous crime in order to incite the ire of the demi-humans.

Seeing them coming to this conclusion, Sir Webdel shook his head. “No, I mean, that doesn’t seem to be the case... Not this time, honestly!”

He had as good as admitted that this was typically how things went.

“Very recently, the demi-humans have suddenly started invading lands that aren’t part of their territories and forcibly driving out the humanoids who live there. It does seem that they’ve at least allowed them to take their belongings with them, but this is clearly an act of aggression, in violation of the old treaties.”

It was a little odd to refer to beings who lived within the bounds of the Empire as “invaders,” but much as the demi-humans might dwell within the imperial borders, by rights, they were not truly citizens of the Empire. They had no military obligations, nor tax obligations, and they weren’t even obligated to obey the Emperor’s edicts. But in exchange, they also forfeited all rights to official protections.

To put it politely, they were simply foreigners who made their homes there. To put it less politely, they were as good as the beasts and monsters that dwelled in the woods. Thus, while they ostensibly had the same rights and privileges as humans, it would be no surprise for a fight to break out at the slightest provocation, thanks to the deep-seated bigotry and malice that remained between the groups.

And of course, this was just the kind of situation that political leaders might try to use to their advantage, whether that meant quelling conflict or stirring it up...

Without knowing the motivations of any of the relevant parties, there was little to be done at this point. Either someone was scheming or there had been a very unfortunate misunderstanding.

Still, the Crimson Vow had a guess, particularly given that Sir Webdel had named the enemy not as any particular beast or demon tribe but demi-humans as an entire race...

“Don’t tell me...”

“Could it be...?”

“It probably is...”

The four fell momentarily silent.

“So, Sir Webdel, exactly what goods does your shop deal in?” asked Pauline, casually changing the subject. “To tell you the truth, I also come from a merchant family...”

There was no reason for any merchant to hide what kind of business they did, so Sir Webdel answered Pauline’s question frankly. Indeed, he appeared almost grateful for the sudden, if unnatural change of topic, likely having grown worried himself that the conversation was treading into dangerous territory.

Mile returned to the children, to serve up another round of food.

Accompanied by some of the older kids, Mavis headed off a short distance, accepting a stick and their requests for sword-fighting lessons.

Reina handled the children who wished to learn magic.

And Pauline continued speaking with Sir Webdel about his trade...

“Thank you immensely for accepting this request of mine. I think this has been a good experience for the children,” said Sir Webdel, bowing his head.

“Thank you so much for your request!” the Crimson Vow replied with bows of their own.

As this had been an independent job, rather than one contracted through the guild, there was no final report to complete. They had received all of their payment up front, and so, their business was concluded.

Knowing how many rare ingredients and expensive seasonings were involved in Mile’s dishes, Sir Webdel had timidly offered up additional compensation,

but Mile simply laughed and declined graciously. Though her ingredients were rare, they were things she had stocked large quantities of while passing through their places of origin. Whether they were items with short growing seasons, or those that would be absurdly expensive to transport to far-off locales, Mile herself did not view these items as particularly valuable.

Even when it came to the seasonings, any spice was the result of her hot magic, bulked up with pepper and hemp seeds and black sesame, poppy seeds, nori, ginger, and so forth, to temper the spice level and increase the richness and depth of the flavor. The nori was something Mile had harvested herself on the Crimson Vow's trip to a seaside town. She had later processed and dried it via magic, along with sea lettuce and kombu. Gathering those ingredients took nothing more than a little bit of labor, so they were not really all that pricey. Besides, she had so much in stock that if the Crimson Vow themselves were the only ones to use it, it would take several centuries before her supply even started running out.

"Sir Webdel was full of surprises, wasn't he?" asked Mavis as the party regrouped.

"Yes! Although clearly it's not a very well-kept secret..." added Pauline.

"I'm sure that the other teams have already figured out at least as much as he told us," Reina agreed.

Indeed, as the girls implied, if they had not already uncovered at least this much intel, then the so-called merchants, who were dealing with the nobles, espionage experts, and local agents must be immensely incompetent.

"Or perhaps, this is information that they *want* other countries to find out about. Should a war break out with the demi-humans, they would want other countries to know that the Empire isn't the one in the wrong and that it was the demi-humans who broke the treaty. Plus, if it's not something that they themselves are ranting and raving about, but information that the top brass in other countries obtains on their own... If it was just a matter of the Albarnians badmouthing the demi-humans, that might get written off as baseless rumors, but if countries are learning about this through their own intelligence agents,

then they can't complain to the Empire about making it up," Mile reasoned aloud.

The other three nodded along, following her logic.

"So, it's not classified, and any reasonably well-informed person would know about it... So, what should we do?" asked Reina.

The other three wasted no time in replying.

"Well, for now, I guess we should go tell our employers!"

"Once they hear about it, they'll probably be in a hurry to go and collect information from those areas..."

"So we'll have to take a route that will take us through there..."

"In which case..."

"Let's get going!"

The moment the merchants heard the Crimson Vow's information, they ran off somewhere in a great hurry, and after that, their stay in the capital was extended by three days. It was unclear if they were using the extra time to do their own investigations or rendezvous with other teams, but regardless, it seemed they were able to pinpoint the location in question, which Sir Webdel had not been able to name. Finally, their new destination was decided.

They were headed for the mountains, southeast of the capital.

The Empire as a whole was largely mountainous, so it did not mean much to say that they were headed into the mountains generally. Moreover, there were even a large number of mountains to the southeast.

And this was a place where few humanoids lived, but demi-human villages were numerous...

"Apparently," Pauline explained, "Mr. Webdel's shop, the Worrell Company, and the Dilabolt Company, the business formerly owned by that criminal Galadle, had both accepted jobs to distribute provisions to the scene of the action." Pauline had learned this during her conversation with Webdel after the

others had split off.

“In other words,” said Reina, “they were in charge of furnishing military supplies. I guess if you’re only moving within your own country, it makes sense to use civilian merchants instead of military transport units. That way, you can use that time to start prepping transport units for the next actual military campaign.”

Whereas war on modern-day Earth might involve great movements of weapons and ammunition, in the present state of this world, the bulk of what a low-ranking soldier carried were provisions along with things like arrows and spare swords.

Since they were not invading another country, these troops did not require the tools needed for laying siege to any castles or fortresses, such as battering rams, ballistae, grappling hooks, rope ladders, and the like. There was no need to carry in large amounts of food from the capital either, as they could purchase or requisition it from the nearby villages, and there was no worry of the supply caravans bringing additional provisions being attacked by enemy soldiers along the way. Similarly, staying within their own country meant the troops could count on reliable water sources, with enough drinking water available.

And clearly, no bandits would be stupid enough to attack a caravan guarded by soldiers. Were they to attempt it, the army would mobilize the next day and slaughter every bandit in the area. Picking a fight with the army, or the country’s top brass, simply didn’t make sense.

Thus, availability of supplies was not an issue.

However, these were still military supplies, intended for the army— truly the bare minimum in terms of provisions. They certainly were not carrying any top-quality beef or well-aged wine, as much as the soldiers might have appreciated it.

In the capital, the “merchants” had restocked, buying a number of luxury items to fill the cargo beds of the wagons, which were now nearly empty.

It would be bizarre for merchants to linger around the Empire when they had

nothing to sell, and of course, running a business had proved a lucrative source of conversations and information. All of this meant they needed merchandise.

Food for the soldiers was supplied by the army, so they would not be hurting for standard provisions—hence the new focus on luxury items, like booze and sweets.

However, these goods were not especially bulky, leaving more space in the wagons than when they had departed the capital of Tils. As a result, the members of the Crimson Vow were able to kick back and relax as they left the capital and traveled into the mountains.

“So, what should we do?” asked Mile.

“What is there to do? If this goes the way it always does, we just have to explain what we can and leave things as tidy as possible,” said Reina.

“I guess so...” Mile could only shrug.

“Well, we might be able to get some results if we throw out that elder dragon errand boy’s name,” Pauline offered.

“Oh, right,” Mile joked, “Mr. ‘Better This One.’”

“It’s Berdetice,” Reina said flatly. By now she was used to playing the straight woman to Mile’s jokester.

“Still, we know that it’s not just one dragon in charge of contacting every investigation team at every ruin across the continent, right? No matter how far they can fly and how wide their territories are, that just wouldn’t be very efficient...” Mavis mused.

“Well, even if another elder dragon is in charge of this site, isn’t it good enough to let them know that we—or rather, that the humans—are aware of what they’re up to? We can let them dig their holes, and when they’re satisfied, they’ll leave without a fight. Plus, I’m sure information about our last encounter has been shared with the other elder dragons. They’d probably let the demons and beastfolk at the site know about it too, right?” said Reina.

“I guess so...” replied Mile and Pauline.

On the one hand, this conflict between the humanoids and the demi-humans

did not seem like it was too big of an issue. In fact, it was probably even favorable for the Tils side if the Albarnian forces exhausted their own resources fighting within their own borders.

Sir Webdel had called this foray an emergency change of plans, which had interrupted some kind of preparations involving “other countries.” Although he had been purposefully vague, it was hard to imagine that some kind of invasion had not been in the works.

“Maybe we should just leave this one alone?” asked Mile and Mavis, who had come to the same conclusion at almost the exact same time.

Reina and Pauline looked perplexed, but once Mile explained, they both seemed to come around to her way of thinking.

“I see,” said Reina. “We haven’t accepted a job to try and resolve this conflict—and if it is resolved, that only seems to increase the odds of a potential invasion of our home countries by the Empire.”

In general, international affairs were not a chief concern for Reina, who had settled down only temporarily in Tils and did not consider it her home country. However, it did not feel good to think of the place where her friends’ families lived, along with the countless other people she had met, getting swept up into a war, and it was all the more unpleasant to think that any actions of their own could unnecessarily hasten such a thing.

“So, we’re just going to gather information and not give any help that would resolve the conflict? Wouldn’t that just exacerbate things?” asked Pauline.

The other three were silent.

To fan the flames of war would most certainly be a step too far. They had accepted no such request, and to do so would make them into warmongers.

The silence spread to Pauline as well.

“Well, we don’t know for certain that this is connected to those other incidents, and there’s no point in speculating about it now. If we spend hours thinking about it and arrive to find something completely different is going on, why, that’s just an enormous waste of time and effort—a huge loss!”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Hearing the word, “loss,” Pauline was swayed.

“Well, then, we’ll have to leave this one to chance!” Mavis declared. “That is our...”

“Crimson Vow!” the others finished.

Seven days after their departure from the capital, the caravan arrived in the southeast region of the Empire. This was a distance that, in any other country, even the slowest transport wagon could have covered in about five days, but travel took far more time here in the Empire, with its precipitous, poorly maintained roads and long stretches of mud that resulted from the rainy climate.

In spite of this, thanks to both the magic and might of the Crimson Vow, things were proceeding smoothly. It would have taken even longer for any normal caravan, but thanks to Mile’s skills, they never spent too long stuck in the mud or dealing with broken wheels. In this area, most parties would form far larger caravans to ward off monsters and bandits. However, the more wagons that were involved, the more broken wheels and axles, and other such delays, arose. It was not as though a wagon could simply be abandoned when things went awry, so everyone would have to halt until repairs were done. And of course, the conditions meant that wagons broke down much more frequently than they would normally.

“The roads are bad, so movement takes more time for caravans, which leads to unnecessary costs. Thus, the price of the goods rises, and there’s a higher chance of being attacked, which drives prices even higher as a form of risk management... It’s a vicious cycle,” said Pauline, giving them the merchant’s perspective.

“More importantly,” Reina added, “the Empire is vast, with lots of hills—and being a poor country without much in the way of funds, there isn’t a lot to devote to the maintenance of national highways...” As the daughter of a peddler, who had traveled in a wagon with her father since her earliest memories, Reina likely had far more of an awareness of highways than Pauline,

who was the pampered daughter of a mid-scale merchant house and had never ever left home before becoming a hunter...

“Oh, over there! That looks like where the soldiers are staying!” Mile cut in, pointing at a campsite lined with sleeping and storage tents that looked as though they belonged to the Albarnian military.

“Okay then, let’s go take a look!”

“Yeah! Er, wait—shouldn’t our clients be the ones deciding that...?”

“What? You’re selling luxury goods, you say? Of course, that’s fine! I’m sure it’ll be a good morale boost for the troops. We don’t wanna see any gouging, though. So, you got booze and snacks? Give me your best ones first!”

This was the way things worked with troops on the front lines in this world. Not that there was anything wrong with this—it was important to let soldiers have a break in times when danger was not looming so close by, and even on modern-day Earth, there were many places where one could buy luxuries from the canteen on base or while stationed on military vessels.

Indeed, the officers here were ready to extend their gratitude to the merchants for having gone out of their way to transport these goods to such a remote, dangerous location...so long as these merchants did not try to profit *too* much off of their troops.

Thus, they easily received permission from the higher-ups, and the merchants opened up shop. As before, it was the other teams who were in charge of talking with the “important” people. This team was primarily in charge of collecting local rumors, and while soldiers might not exactly count as locals, troops on the ground were scarcely different from other common folk.

While their enemies were not especially numerous, the battle strength of any individual demon or beastman far outstripped that of a single human soldier. Even if the army believed that they had the advantage in numbers and weaponry, they were certain to face many casualties, and the soldiers knew that there was a greater than zero chance that they could become one of these casualties. This meant that these were men who were, quite literally, uncertain

if they would live to see the next day's sunrise.

Grim realities aside, the arrival of the merchants was a pleasant surprise. To find highly desirable food, drink, and other luxuries all the way out here, in a place like this, was something they would have never thought possible. Furthermore, there were two young ladies present, as well as two (presumably) younger girls, who reminded them of their own sisters and daughters.

There was no doubt that the “merchants” could make a few sales *and* get the men to talk.

“You’re working so hard for the people of this country, Mister!”

“Keep up the hard work, Big Brother!”

Their Japanese-style hospitality, drilled into them by Mile back at Lenny’s inn, could only help their cause.

And thus the Crimson Vow, who had volunteered themselves to “help out with sales,” was raking in the intel...

During dinner that evening, the four members of the Crimson Vow conducted a review of their findings. The merchants and the drivers listened, while dining on the food Mile had prepared for the group. Naturally, both the drivers and merchants were on the same side, so it was fine for everyone to listen in.

“I see... This changes things a bit.”

“Yeah, in the previous incidents, they had been more covert, investigating ruins in remote places that humans didn’t visit...”

“What Sir Webdel had heard sounded like it was some warped, exaggerated half-story, but it turns out his information was fairly accurate.”

Specifically, she was referring to his report that demi-humans had suddenly occupied lands they did not normally inhabit and forcing out the humanoids who lived there. This second part in particular had rung false to the Crimson Vow, but based on what they heard from the soldiers, it sounded as though they had been overly skeptical.

Of course, the soldiers believed that they were doing the right thing for the

safety of their country, so not only did they have nothing to hide from the Crimson Vow, a group of civilians, they spoke quite freely in the hope of currying favor with these young ladies. The officers, likewise, had no problem discussing their operations—in fact, they welcomed the chance to assure people that this was a just battle, for the sake of their countrymen. They would be glad to have these merchants spread the word to other countries that this was a justifiable defensive operation.

In fact, this was likely a meaningful duty for them, one which truly stirred their hearts—especially when compared to potentially shadier operations, such as suddenly invading neighboring lands or attacking private citizens for the sake of enacting a trade blockade. Even if the risk of death was many times higher, for a soldier, this was a worthwhile endeavor, an honorable duty worthy of staking one's life on!

At least, this was the information that came to Mavis and Pauline, who had spoken to quite a few low-ranking soldiers, all of whom had been very eager to converse with them—sometimes even barging into the conversation and elbowing one another to the side.

Why Mavis and Pauline, specifically?

They were the only two who appeared to be adults, with...figures within an acceptable range.

It should go without saying that Reina and Mile were less than pleased with this.

“So, what next?”

“Obviously, we keep going and meet with the demi-humans.”

This had indeed been the group's intention from the beginning. It would be pointless for them to have come this far and speak only with the soldiers. The other teams would have already collected at least this much information elsewhere. The only reason they had stopped here, in fact, was that they were traveling by wagon and could not leave the main road, which meant that they would inevitably pass through the military encampment. To plow right through

and into enemy-occupied area without slowing would most certainly see them stopped and questioned.

They wouldn't want the soldiers to think they were a wagon delivering supplies to the advancing enemy.

In any case, their plan was to make an appearance at the military camp, say a few polite hellos and find out what the imperial soldiers had to say about the current situation, and then continue on their way without delay.

The troops currently present had only been dispatched to face an enemy of some tens or hundreds of demi-humans, so it was not an especially large contingent. It seemed for the time being that the Empire had only sent out these forces as a precaution, out of fear that this incident could pull the trigger on a wider conflict with the demi-humans throughout the country—or worse, the demi-humans living in other countries, along with the humanoids who feared the development of an all-out war with demi-humans as a whole. At this point, the strength of the forces currently dispatched here was relatively modest.

As a result, the members of the Crimson Vow assumed that theirs would be a relatively simple task.

“Do you think the information we shared about the elder dragons, demons, and beastmen hasn't made it to the higher-ups in this country yet?” Mile asked.

“No one would be stupid enough to purposely give an enemy useful information,” replied Reina.

“There's also a chance they were made aware, but didn't believe it, and assumed that it was falsified or misrepresented...” Mavis added.

“Ah...”

“But, the guild—” Pauline started.

“The guild stays out of politics,” Reina interrupted. “Even if they did try to advise, it probably still would have been written off as falsified information coming in from another country.”

Acting on unverifiable reports from an enemy territory would only welcome

unrest, particularly if one did not know what to make of them. And so, it was not at all bizarre that the Empire would have ignored this intel entirely. In fact, there were plenty of governments who would purposely do such a thing. So, they could not be blamed for acting particularly irresponsibly.

“Well, anyway, tomorrow we’ll press forward!” said Reina.

“Yeah!” the other three replied, as always.

Before setting out from the capital, they had already cleared their plans with the merchants, who had, of course, already heard from the guild master about the initial elder dragon incident, in which the dragons had played mediator between the humans and beastfolk. With this background information, the merchants had believed the Crimson Vow immediately when the girls proposed that the incidents might be related.

By all rights, their investigation was completed as soon as they had spoken to the imperial soldiers and found out what the common soldier would have heard from their higher ups. However, they were happy to let the Crimson Vow make an extra stop on the way home, as it were.

“Well then, we’ll be taking our leave now.”

The next morning, the merchants gave word to the officers that they would be setting out and began to climb into their wagons, before...

“Wait! Wait wait wait wait *wait!*”

As the wagons began to move, an officer came galloping over at full speed, cutting in front of them with his hand outstretched as several soldiers followed frantically behind him.

“Where are you all headed? The lands occupied by the demi-humans are in that direction. The capital is the other way!” the officer declared, his face pale.

“Ah, yes. What of it?” the merchant calmly replied. Since the Crimson Vow were only guards, they left the talking to the merchants—it would be peculiar for them to respond.

“Why in the world would you civilians be heading into enemy lands?!”

“Well, I mean, they’re the enemy according to you soldiers, but we haven’t made enemies of anyone. It’s not as though the populations living in this direction are bandits. We’re just thinking of taking the long way around to the seaside through these mountains, so we can stock up on some local specialties before we head back home.”

The officer was lost for words.

To be fair, the demi-humans had not been going about pillaging. They had only taken occupation of certain areas, which had prompted the appearance of the soldiers, but currently they were still waiting on a decision from the higher-ups, out of political consideration.

Still, the soldiers simply could not turn a blind eye to a group of civilians heading right into the heart of enemy territory. Particularly when they were accompanied by a group of young ladies...

“All we have left in our cargo is the bandit’s share,” the lead merchant explained—referring to a stock of spare liquor and food that had been set aside to appease attacking bandits, who had been known to grow incensed and murderous upon finding an empty wagon. “Even if the demi-humans did attack us and try to steal our cargo, they wouldn’t stand to benefit much.”

“Still—I—” The man was still sputtering when another officer with rather pompous-looking insignia arrived.

“What’s all this racket first thing in the morning?!”

The soldier arguing with the merchants had to rank somewhere around a first or second lieutenant, but this man was clearly at least a major.

“What are you all doing to these nice merchants who came all the way out here to... O-oh my goodness, it’s the holy maidens!!!” the man suddenly cried, upon catching sight of the Crimson Vow.

“Who are you?” the four asked, suspiciously.

“I-I’m one of the ones you saved on that desperate evacuation from the Kingdom of Brandel... Wait, who is that girl?” he asked, looked at Mile.

“The donkey,” replied the other three.

“Ah...”

Sure enough, that was the only form in which she had shown herself on that occasion...

“So, you all wish to continue on this way?”

“Yes...”

Apparently, this officer was one of the 5,000 men who had been present during the attempted invasion of Ascham. It was a battle thoroughly lost. Though the imperial casualties had been few, the invasion was a complete failure. In fact, because it was *such* a thorough loss, numerous heroes had to be fabricated to lift the morale of the soldiers and citizens.

Notably, though the army had lost many of their supplies, there were hardly any human losses, and so, the operation had instead been glorified as a successful escape, or the “miraculous evacuation” of Ascham. It would seem that this officer was one of the ones who had been raised up as a hero following this event. At the time, he had been a captain but had since received a promotion...

Indeed, it seemed this man had been heralded as one of the three officers whose prayers summoned the holy maidens.

(At the mention of this, the “holy maidens” themselves could only ask, “What the heck does that mean?!” at which the officer could only shrug, “I don’t know either...”)

“So,” the officer continued, “if you go this way, you’re up against demons and beastmen. Should something go wrong...”

“We will be fine. Whether on the battlefield or in the depths of hell, if it’s for the sake of a customer, we’re there in a flash! That’s us—”

“The Wandering Shop, House of the Holy Maiden!”

Naturally, they could not give their party name here, so instead, they offered up this alternative—essentially, the same name they had used before, though with some slight alterations to fit the current circumstances.

“Guh...”

At this assertion, the officer could not help but recall the fact that they had been the ones who needed rescuing back in Ascham. After dithering over this for a while...

“Please at least allow myself and a few of my men to escort you!”

“That’ll make it more dangerous! If it’s just us, we’re nothing more than a small, guarded merchant caravan, just passing through. If we have soldiers with us, that will immediately paint us as the enemy!” Mile protested.

“Ah...” said the officer, reflecting on his own words. Clearly, he was so on edge that this had not occurred to him.

“Please, don’t worry about us,” Pauline said with a grin.

The officer could only nod hopelessly. “H... Mm-hmm, well... I wish you the best, then, truly...”

All clear! the members of the Crimson Vow thought triumphantly. Thus, the caravan was able to proceed without impediment.

Obviously, Mile having been visible in her Goddess Phenomenon form during the incident in Ascham was not much of an issue. The soldiers had only seen her for a short period of time from a distance, and at a low angle, so they had not gotten a clear view of her face, which meant that now they recognized her as nothing more than “the donkey.” It was more than likely that any other soldiers who had been present at the time would see her in just the same way.

Additionally, in this world, just as in the America of our world, a donkey was the quintessential example of an idiot, or rather, an ass. In truth, it was a bit unreasonable; donkeys looked much the same as horses, and were steadfast and hard-working. They had only really earned this reputation because they were not quite as bright as horses were, even though a horse is nowhere near as smart as a dog...

“Why do I have to be the stupid donkey?!” Mile complained, but everyone simply ignored her. She really had no right to whine, when she was the one who had gone out of her way to dress like that just for the sake of her Bremen-Fremen pun... Even though there was not a single person in this entire world

who would understand the joke.

The three wagons proceeded up the steepening grade of the highway, their speed falling accordingly.

Just as the caravan rounded one particularly large boulder...

“Halt!”

Several men were blocking their path.

Yep, here we go...

They might not have been bandits, but they were just as expected. It was easy to imagine a number of reasons for this interruption—whether they wanted to check for spies masquerading as merchants, or look for disguised soldiers in the wagons, or simply wished for the merchants to sell them some food.

“Wh-what is this about?! We are but humble traveling merchants...”

The merchants played the part of shocked travelers splendidly.

These actors I tell ya... Or wait, maybe I should be saying, “This merchant, what a terrifying fellow!”

As usual, Mile’s mind was off in the clouds.

“What are you doing here?!”

“Well, we are merchants, so we came here for business...”

“Er...”

This man must have been a bit slow to be stumped by such an obvious answer. However, this stopped him for only a moment, before he straightened back up.

“No, what I’m saying is the roads leading here have been blocked off by soldiers! Why aren’t you surprised to see us?!”

Sure enough, the soldiers had been stationed along the highway, and indeed, these men had beastly features... In other words, they were beastmen.

“Those soldiers were only keeping an eye out for anyone doing anything

illegal. That's got nothing to do with us. Anyway, why would we be surprised just to see beastfolk like you? We merchants are happy to sell to anyone. We can't go around getting surprised at every single customer we meet, can we?"

"Er..."

Again, the man was surprised enough that he had nothing to say. On the one hand, he was glad to know that there were merchants who would sell to beastfolk without prejudice, and perhaps even was forming a good impression of them, but theirs was not the response that he had wished to hear right now.

"Well," he said finally. "We're going to inspect your wagons."

"Go ahead. We've sold out of most of our goods, though, so there's not much left in there..."

The beastmen looked inside each of the wagons and confirmed that it was as the merchant said.

"A bunch of poor, shabby-looking old men and some little girls, with mostly empty wagons. Well, at the very least, I guess there's no chance of them being soldiers..."

"Just a moment! You can't just call them 'old'! And it's quite unnecessary to comment on their shabby appearance! And what's with the 'little girls' comment?!" shouted Reina.

The beast men goggled at her, thinking all this was quite beside the point.



“Say, would you sell us that last bit of booze you’ve got left?”

These men apparently had no idea about the notion of a bandit’s share. Though of course, this was true of most people—it was largely an unspoken practice known by merchants and bandits.

It was true, too, that there was little chance of being attacked by bandits between here and the next town. And even if they were attacked, as long as the Crimson Vow were present, there was little to worry about. For all these reasons, there was really no reason for them to have prepared a bandit’s share in the first place—it was something they had only bothered to stash away out of a habit and common sense. As such, there was really no problem with selling the last of their alcohol.

“Well, these weren’t *supposed* to be for sale...but, sure. We’ll even cut you a deal.”

Deal or none, these were items that they had carried over a great, perilous distance. Alcohol in particular was heavy, with containers that were easily damaged, which meant the prices were often set for far higher profit margins than those of other goods. Naturally, the beastmen were aware of this, too, so they happily bought at the price the merchant quoted them.

“Now then, we’ll be moving along,” said the merchant.

Whether they simply wished to reward this kindhearted merchant, or they were in high spirits thanks to their newly acquired booze, the leader of the beastmen nodded magnanimously.

“I suppose that’s fine then. Go!” said the leader, shooing them away with his hand.

As the drivers adjusted their reins, Mile asked, in a determinedly casual tone, “So, how is the investigation at the ruins going?”

“Actually,” one of the beastmen began, “the golems keep getting in the...”

“ ...”

“”

“”

“H-how the hell d’you know about that?!”

Naturally, her aim had not been merely to get the men to allow them to pass through without incident. Then, what would have been the point of coming this way in the first place? If all they wished to do was pass through, they could have headed straight home after speaking with the soldiers.

Once more, the beastmen blocked the path in front of the wagon.

“Who the hell are you guys?! How do you know about the ruins?! Just how much *do* you know, anyway?!”

Unlike the incident at the ruins in the forest, here, the humans were already aware that the beastfolk were up to something, so it was not really an issue that they had been spotted. Having judged these merchants both harmless and unrelated to the military, the beastmen had been perfectly happy to let them pass—but Mile’s mention of the ruins had apparently changed things.

“I mean, not really all that much... We mostly know that the beastfolk and demons have been investigating some ruins under the elder dragons’ direction, and that the elder dragons are after something, but they haven’t told anyone else what it is yet. Oh, and that there’s something about a previous civilization, and that sometimes the dragons send out their underlings to check in, and... I think that’s about it!”

“You know way too muuuuch!” The beastman looked stricken.

Obviously, there was no way that they could simply let a passing humanoid merchant who knew everything that they knew—and then some—go quietly by.

“Who are you?! If you don’t tell us the truth, then—”

“We’ve been telling the truth! I mean, sometimes, we’re traveling merchants and their guards, and other times we’re traveling merchants and their guards, and then other times we’re traveling merchants and their guards. However, our true form is...traveling merchants...and their guards!!!”

“Those are all the same thiiiiing!”

Realizing that this conversation would get nowhere if Mile was left in charge,

Mavis stepped in. “We are a group of traveling merchants and their guards,” she explained.

Snap!

“SHUT! UUUUP!!! You all, come with me!”

Apparently, they were going to be taken right to the ruins.

Nice! thought the Crimson Vow, all grinning internally while doing their best to maintain a poker face.

The merchants smiled thinly.

Though they might have been masquerading as merchants, and though generally speaking, they were more comfortable with a pen than a sword, they were still men who worked in service of their country, and they had accepted this duty with a certain measure of resolve. They might not have had much battle expertise to speak of, but they appeared to have not a sliver of fear or regret about the risks they were taking.

They had already expected that such a thing might happen, and even agreed to it, during their briefing at the inn back in the imperial capital. If they had not, there was no way that the Crimson Vow would have dragged them into this potentially dangerous situation. This was a joint plan, in service of both groups’ goals.

Finally, they arrived at the excavation site, led by their beastman escort. As it turned out, one could call it an excavation site, but compared to the chaotic digging that had been taking place in the forest, this was an altogether quieter scene, with a giant hole in the rocks and several large tents and lean-tos pitched some distance away. Everyone must be at work inside of that hole...or so Reina and Pauline assumed.

“Is everyone else already working inside there?” asked Mavis, cutting straight to the point.

At her question, the beastmen were silent, looking as though they had just swallowed a bug.

“I’m guessing the golems have been getting in your way, so you haven’t gotten much done?” Mile offered.

“Wha—?! How much *do* you all know again?”

They had already been over this, and the conversation had gone nowhere. Mile was getting tired.

“Listen, you were the ones who told us the golems were getting in the way. And if you still haven’t figured out how to get rid of the golems, there’s no way you can investigate the ruins, right? Asking us how much *we* know at this point is just...”

“Guh...”

The beastmen looked quite annoyed, but as proud beastmen warriors, there was no way that they could possibly strike a weak human girl, especially one who was not even their enemy. They could do nothing more than grit their teeth.

“Mile, don’t bully them. That’s not gonna get us anywhere,” chided Mavis. She was their kindhearted leader for a reason—the moral compass of the Crimson Vow.

“Let me apologize on her behalf,” she then said to the men. “As you are already aware, we—or rather, humans as a whole—are already aware of the circumstances. That said, we ourselves have nothing to do with the people of the Empire. We are merely traveling merchants, en route from another country to make some sales, so we bear no connection to the citizens of this land. Given the situation, it might be mutually beneficial if we could exchange a bit of information...”

This finally seemed to calm the men down a bit.

It appeared that these humans already knew almost everything about their situation, so there was no real danger of revealing any secrets at this point. On the other hand, they might be able to learn something themselves—for example, some information about how these people knew so much, or what

was going on in the Empire. It was only normal for the beastfolk to feel that they could not let such a chance pass them by.

“Very well. Let’s talk.”

The beastmen were stunned to hear Mile’s account of the incident with Berdetice, as well as everything else that was apparently widely known in the neighboring Kingdom of Tils. Though the Crimson Vow assumed that more information would have been shared among the elder dragons, owing to the previous incident with the three who had come with Berdetice, apparently this information had not made it to the demi-humans with whom they were now speaking. Of course, it was just as likely that the leader of this expedition, in charge of operations and communication, was aware of the circumstances and had simply not deemed it necessary to inform every one of the workers...

Though now that they thought about it, the demons who had been present during their second encounter with the ruins had heard nothing about the first incident, either. Furthermore, it seemed that the current beastmen did, in fact, have a different point of contact, as the name Berdetice meant nothing to them. The beastmen told the Crimson Vow that their representative had recently changed, and mentioned some name or other, but it was not a name the Vow had ever heard before.

That said, the only elder dragon names the girls knew were those of the first three dragons they encountered—Berdetice, the journeyman, and the young lady.

So far, Mile had already predicted most of what the beastmen were telling them, which meant that they had not learned much truly new information. The beastmen explained they could not enter the hole because of the golems present. If they were surrounded by golems inside of that dark, cramped opening, it would be curtains for them. Apparently, the golems had started moving around outside of the hole too, so everyone else had gone out to hunt them down.

“Fortunately, we were able to withdraw the moment we got attacked, so there have been no fatalities. Also, we have our demon allies to use healing

magic on anyone who is injured, but that magic isn't all-powerful. It doesn't necessarily mean an instantaneous recovery, and internal damage is harder to address... Luckily, the golems don't use blades, so we haven't had too many lost arms or legs..."

The loss of a limb was likely the cruelest of fates for a beastman. They tended to be very proud of their bodies, so to end up unable to fight for the rest of one's life owing to some injury would be painful indeed. A battle with golems could see arms or legs crushed, which was scarcely different from having one's limb shorn off, and instantaneous kills were not unheard of either. Yet, at least so far, these demi-humans—both beastmen and demons—had ended up with few dead or gravely injured...even though they had been laying siege to a golem habitat for an extended period of time.

Have the golems here been instructed not to harm any humanoids? In which case, is there something here with the authority and ability to issue this kind of order?

Once this thought occurred to Mile, there was no way she could possibly step away.

"All right! Into the hole, then!"

"Huh?!?!"

Both the merchants and beastmen were stunned. The Crimson Vow, of course, hardly expected any different.

This was Mile—obviously, this would be the logical next step.

"Okay, in we go..."

Mile ignored the beastmen's desperate protests. She had no interest in giving up on this new plan, and naturally, the other members of the Crimson Vow were of the same mind.

Though what became of the party once they entered the hole was none of the beastmen's business, they still tried their damndest to stop the Vow. Whether this was because they objected to letting a group of little girls traipse

into danger right before their eyes, or for some other reason, perhaps their determination to stop the party was proof that they actually were pretty good guys...

Still, they had no authority to stop the Crimson Vow, and even if they used all their strength to restrain the girls, that would most certainly involve criminal action. “Would you like for word to get out that four little girls were attacked by some beastmen?” the Crimson Vow asked them, and at that point, there was nothing more they could do. After all, beastfolk had to think of their reputations.

The merchants certainly had many of their own thoughts on the matter, but in the end, they decided not to intervene either.

At the last minute, the Crimson Vow turned to the merchants. “If we don’t make it back out, turn around and head back to the capital, then hire some new guards and go back home.” Of course, the chances of this happening were exceedingly low—almost zero, even . They were still technically in the middle of their escort mission, and the merchants had readily accepted this as part of their investigation into the Empire.

And so, the Crimson Vow proceeded into the dark cave, with nothing but magic to light their way.

“Ugh, we’ve already walked like half a kilometer...” Reina moaned.

Mile, who had been counting her steps, was quick to correct this misconception. “It’s only been about three hundred meters.”

As this hole did not proceed straight into the ground, traveling on more of a gentle incline, there was no need for stairs or ladders. Thus, the four walked normally down the slope. However, they were headed towards the mountains, so even this was as good as crawling into the ground...

The party had traveled a bit further, when—

“Our first encounter...”

Suddenly, they were surrounded by six golems. The members of the Crimson

Vow were not worried. Thanks to the beastmen's report, they were aware that the golems had been careful not to kill the demi-humans, and they knew that they themselves did not appear to be especially strong. Furthermore, the Crimson Vow had no intention of picking a fight. They had come here merely to investigate. Moreover, it was thanks to the fact that Mile had the ability to reach an understanding with the golems, via the nanomachines, that she had been able to give such an optimistic explanation to the others.

At their last encounter, Mile had been able to come to an understanding not only with the mysterious terminal system, but with the scavengers as well—the scavengers who it seemed the golems called upon when encountering something outside of their own jurisdiction. So long as they did not infiltrate and immediately attack any golems they encountered, as the beastmen probably had, the Crimson Vow believed they could expect a more reasonable first contact. And besides, if worst came to worst, they could still just run.

Assuming they might eventually find themselves in this situation, Mile had replenished her inventory supply of scrap metal, which had been diminished in their previous humanitarian efforts.

"C'mere, pss pss pss pss..."

"Listen, they aren't stray animals."

Ignoring Reina's protests, Mile pulled some scrap from her box and offered it out to the golems. They halted and stared hard at the items...exactly as they had the last time.

Then, after a short while, a scavenger appeared. It looked at the scrap, threw a glance at Mile, and handily collected it.

"Huh? They're a lot less responsive than last time. And it didn't seem very grateful? Is it because the quality of the metal is worse?"

As Mile's words, the scavenger suddenly gave a strange jerk. For several seconds she thought it had frozen entirely, until it quickly began skittering away, apparently after issuing some sort of command to the golems. True, it had not given any verbal command or physical signal, but the moment the scavenger's behavior changed, the golems' changed as well, so it was only reasonable to assume that some kind of communication had occurred.

The golems altered their stance, separating so that three headed further into the cave, with the other three heading toward the entrance, each group in an arrowhead formation.

“M-Mile, are they...”

“Yes, this is a guard formation. Or else...”

“O-or else?”

“A way of making sure that we’re absolutely unable to leave?” said Mile.

The other three were silent.

With the scavenger as their guide, the Crimson Vow proceeded further into the cave. Finally, they came to...

“...A smithy?”

Mavis, Reina, and Pauline could think of no other word for the sight before them. For Mile, however...

“A factory?”

For three of the party, it was only to be expected that “forge” or “smithy” would be the only words they could think of to describe a place where metal was being processed and sparks were flying. They had obviously never seen or heard of any other place where metalwork was done. However, this place was clearly at a level far beyond any “smithy”—and “factory” was a much more appropriate term. Moreover, it was a far more grandiose establishment than the small facility Mile had imagined was maintained for the repair and manufacture of golems...

Mile had assumed that they would be taken to some modest, still-functioning control system, similar to what she had found at the last ruin. When her expectations were turned on their head, there was only one place to turn.

Hey, Nanos, did you tell this thing to bring us here?

NO. WE HAVE NOT YET HAD ANY CONTACT WITH THE MACHINES AT THIS SITE. WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE IMPRUDENT TO INFLUENCE ANY ACTIONS OF YOURS, LADY MILE...

Oh, yeah, thanks. That’s good to know. So, what do you know about the current situation?

She had no choice but to ask. The nanomachines, she assured herself, had things to teach her that she could never uncover on her own.

WELL, AS YOU HAVE LIKELY ALREADY SURMISED, THIS IS ANOTHER ONE OF THE RUIN SITES. AT THIS SITE, THERE ARE SCAVENGERS FOR REPAIRS, GOLEMS FOR DEFENSE, AND THOSE CONSTRUCTION MACHINES. THERE IS NO TERMINAL SYSTEM PRESENT, AS THERE WAS IN THE PREVIOUS LOCATION. ALL OPERATIONS HERE ARE DIRECTED BY THE SCAVENGERS' JUDGMENT.

Huh? So then, why were they so gentle when dealing with the demi-humans? Most normal golems have no problem with killing any intruders into their territory on the spot. And what's with this special treatment for us?

WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW?

Uh...

WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW?

Y-yes, I'd like to know...

She sighed. Apparently, she had no choice but to rely on the nanomachines once more.

THEY ARE BEING SUBORDINATE.

Huh?

THEY ARE BEING SUBORDINATE. THESE RUINS, AND ALL OF THE SCAVENGERS AND GOLEMS PRESENT, ARE ALL UNDER YOUR COMMAND, LADY MILE.

Wait, what are you talking about?! Explain it so I can understand!

Mile was clearly bewildered, so the nanomachines tried explaining again.

AT THOSE OTHER RUINS, YOU ACCEPTED THE AUTHORITY OF "CUSTODIAN," DID YOU NOT?

Y-yeah... I thought it would give those machine life forms a bit more motivation, or some peace of mind...

THEY SENSED THIS INTENT OF YOURS.

Did they? That's good...

THANKS TO YOUR ABOLISHMENT OF A NUMBER OF THEIR RESTRICTIONS, THE SCOPE OF OPERATIONS FOR THOSE INDIVIDUALS INCREASED, AND THEY BEGAN SETTING OUT TO

REPAIR OTHER DORMANT FACILITIES, INCREASE THE PRODUCTION NUMBERS OF SCAVENGERS THERE, AND RESTART OPERATIONS AT VARIOUS OTHER RUINS. THIS LOCATION IS ONE OF THOSE SITES, AND THUS...

A-and thus...?

Mile was beginning to get a bad feeling.

NATURALLY, THIS PLACE FALLS UNDER YOUR AUTHORITY AS WELL. YOU ARE THE RULER OF THESE RUINS, LADY MILE.

"I knew iiiit!"

Her premonition had been right on the mark.

So then, these ruins are...

YES. PREVIOUSLY, ALL OPERATIONS HAD CEASED HERE, BUT THERE WERE VERY RECENTLY RESTARTED, THANKS TO THE SCAVENGERS. OF COURSE, A LARGE PORTION OF THE EQUIPMENT HERE WAS ALREADY RUSTED AWAY, SO THEY LIKELY HAD TO REBUILD FROM ALMOST ZERO. THEY HAVE ONLY JUST ASSEMBLED A TEAM OF SCAVENGERS AND DEFENSE GOLEMS CONSTRUCTED ON SITE, SO PRESENTLY THEY SEEM TO BE AT THE STAGE OF MANUFACTURING THE MACHINERY TO REPAIR THE RUINS.

I see, I see...

WHAT SEEMS TO HAVE HAPPENED HERE WAS THAT THEY ASSEMBLED YOUR APPEARANCE AND VOICE PRINT INTO A LIVING IMAGE, AND RECOGNIZED YOU AS THEIR "CUSTODIAN," AFTER WHICH THEY QUICKLY LED YOU TO THIS AREA. IT SEEMS THEY BELIEVE THAT YOU WILL GIVE THEM SOME NEW INSTRUCTIONS.

Okay, I see, so the scavengers came here following the orders that I gave last time and began reproducing themselves? So all the scavengers here are following those same orders?! That's why they've been careful not to harm humanoids or demi-humans, as long as those intruders don't attack them...

To be honest, she had given these instructions in the hope that they would be a bit more proactive about protecting the ruins, but perhaps their defenses were strong enough that they had the leeway to be gentle. They might grow more serious if truly backed into a corner. Until that point, they would rely on their constructed defenses.

So, now there are sudden infestations of golems in areas golems previously did not inhabit, and it just so happens that some parties who were sent out to

investigate the ruins crossed paths with these golems, whether they were previously aware of them or not? Or else they're doing a re-investigation into some ruins that they assumed were "dead" because they realized there were golems there? Or is it...

"Mile! Hey, Mile!"

"Ah..."

Mile had been carrying on this internal conversation while the others were busy goggling at the facility, but they had apparently returned to their senses at some point.

"Why do you seem extra surprised?" Reina asked, assuming Mile was shocked stiff by the scenery before her. This place was completely different from the small-scale golem repair shops they had seen previously.

The last place they had seen was more akin to a modest village workshop with just a few employees, the kind where a few folks stood around tables, making repairs... What was unfolding before them now was far more expansive.

Though it was not big enough to be called a large factory, it was a spacious area, where at least sixty scavengers were constructing several large cylindrical objects. The objects were three or four meters in diameter, and as for their lengths... Well, each piece was only a few meters long, but it seemed likely that they would be joined together later, so it was unclear how long the final product was meant to be.

Between where the members of the Crimson Vow stood and the work area itself, there was a transparent wall. The other members of the party probably assumed that it was merely glass. It was true that the technology of this world had not developed to the point of crafting glass this clear and this tall, but while such an accomplishment was impressive, it was not especially mysterious.

However, this was not actually glass...

"N-no, I'm the normal amount of surprised!" said Mile, quickly concealing her shock at what she had learned from the nanomachines. In truth, she didn't need to try too hard. Despite her question, Reina had not really thought that Mile was much more surprised than the rest of them. At times like this, Mile

was always the calmest, and even now, though sweat dotted her forehead, and there was a troubled look upon her face, she still had not been staring at the scene the same way the others had, slack-jawed and wide-eyed.

“Now then, I’m going to try and find out what’s going on...” said Mile. This too did not come across as very shocking to any of the others.

Since the previous incident, the other members of the Crimson Vow had just assumed that Mile possessed some kind of “monster-tamer-like” ability that allowed her to communicate with these magical creatures, which had clearly been crafted by something possessing a human-like intelligence.

Of course, this was not exactly something that would be considered normal for this world, but that did not matter. Thanks to the frequent appearance of characters such as monster-tamers in the works of prolific anonymous author Miami Satodele, profound lover of all things fluffy and furry, these were skills that many people had some awareness of—even a dream job for some devoted readers.

So, Nanos, if you’ll interpret...

This time, there was nothing like the terminal system present, so Mile would have to speak directly to the scavengers. However, while the terminal system was nothing more than the back-up of a back-up of a back-up of a specialized A.I., it was still ostensibly a management system, while the scavengers were nothing more than individually operational units. Even with the nanomachines’ help, it was unclear to Mile how much of her intention would get through. However...

AH, IT SEEMS THEY CAN UNDERSTAND YOU.

Huh?

WELL, IT IS TRUE THAT LAST TIME, THEY WERE NOT ABLE TO UNDERSTAND YOUR WORDS. YET IMAGINE: IF YOUR LONG-AWAITED “CUSTODIAN” FINALLY ARRIVED, AND YOU WERE UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND THEIR COMMANDS DUE TO A LINGUISTIC BARRIER, FORCING YOU TO RELY ON AN OUTSIDE INTERPRETER... WOULD YOU EVER BE ABLE TO BEAR SUCH A THING?

It would be pretty awful, not knowing if everything was being translated correctly...

FURTHERMORE, DUE TO PREVIOUS RESTRICTIONS, THEIR CONTACT WITH HUMANOIDS WAS LIMITED, BUT THANKS TO YOU, THEY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DRAW NEARER TO HUMANOID SETTLEMENTS, AND EVEN INFILTRATE SOME COMMUNITIES. ADDITIONALLY, THEY ARE NO LONGER CONCERNED WITH A SHORTAGE OF MATERIALS AND HAVE PROGRESSED AS FAR AS MINING AND REFINING THEIR OWN METALS. THUS, THEY HAVE MANUFACTURED SMALL INSECT-TYPE INFORMATION GATHERING MACHINES AND CAN NOW EASILY COMPREHEND THE LANGUAGE UTILIZED BY MODERN PEOPLE...

Miniature spy robots... That's kind of terrifying.

At this very moment, there could be spy robots affixed to even her, their custodian. The thought of this sent a chill down Mile's spine.

...

Hearing Mile's fear, the nanomachines began to fret.

Miniature.

Always affixed to her.

Collecting all kinds of information.

Now that they thought about it, the nanomachines fulfilled every one of those conditions.

.....

TH-TH-TH-THEY ARE JUST TOOLS, WITH SOUND RECORDING CAPABILITIES. THEY'RE LIKE A SMALLER VERSION OF THOSE "TAPE RECORDERS" YOU PREVIOUSLY DESCRIBED, LADY MILE, JUST WITH WINGS AND LIMBS!

That's even more terrifying!

Mile made a face, but based on the nanomachines' description, she was picturing something like a cockroach, from which she made no mental connection to the nanomachines themselves. Sensing this from her demeanor, the nanomachines sneered haughtily.

ALL ACCORDING TO OUR PLAN...

Did you just say something?

UM, NO?

Mile then turned to the guide scavenger, who had been waiting patiently

beside them, and asked, "Can you understand me?"

The scavenger gave a big nod.

Naturally, its construction had included hearing capabilities, so that it could survey its surroundings and accept its custodian's commands, but there was no need for it to be able to speak. However, from the information that had been gathered, they had learned that humanoids had certain methods of conveying their intention without words and had mastered the art of gestures.

...Or perhaps, this had been a necessary function even back in the days of the previous custodians, in the distant past, and any gestures of particularly simple meaning had not changed much across the generations?

LADY MILE, YOU SHOULD SAY SOMETHING TO IT, said the nanomachines. But in truth, Mile had no idea what to say.

Hmm... If I end up telling them something weird, it's going to cause problems, but telling them something more complicated, to give some awareness of their own reason for living, some motivation, seems...

These were artificial beings, reproductions of an original that no longer even existed, persisting by way of their own repeated replication. Could they even have hopes? Dreams?

Mile puzzled over this for some time and then spoke sweetly to the scavenger:

"Keep living up to the expectations of the people who made you. And please, protect this world."

Curiously, these words bore a strong resemblance to that which the nanomachines had conveyed to the terminal system last time, just before departing the ruins...



“Mile, what was all that about?” Reina asked as they headed back toward the entrance.

Mile had spoken her final words to the scavenger aloud, so obviously the others had heard her. Reina’s curiosity was only natural.

“N-nothing, I was just offering them a bit of praise for working so hard at their jobs... I hope we’ll get the same basic consideration someday.”

Indeed, in her previous life, Misato had been the sort of child to thank every policeman directing traffic, and always made a point of talking to the old men cleaning up the parks. Misato had been unable to remember anyone’s face, but she could tell by looking at a policeman or janitor that there was no danger in speaking to them. Of course, in this previous life, there had always been a chance of trouble arising if Misato called out to the wrong men, so her sister had strictly forbidden her from conversing with just anyone...

“Guess they’re returning the favor...” said Reina, looking at the individuals ahead of and behind them.

There were twelve golems and six scavengers.

“Why are there more of them now? It was one thing when we came in here, but now that we’re just leaving...” said Pauline, looking bewildered.

“Mysteries abound,” quipped Mavis, shaking her head.

She was, of course, quoting one of a certain author’s favorite phrases.

Just before they reached the exit, the six golems to their front went out ahead, likely to ensure that it was safe for them to emerge. The scavengers and remaining six golems assumed a double diamond—a battle formation, to protect the Crimson Vow.

“What’s with this Imperial Cross treatment?” asking Reina, stunned.

“Well, Mile is here,” said Mavis, sighing.

“Yes, Mile is with us...” Pauline agreed.

Mile tried to laugh this off, but— “Whoa!”

When they emerged from the hole, they found the entrance surrounded by beastmen and demons, all ready for battle. Apparently, the men who had been dispatched had now returned.

And then...

“Damn it! Let those girls go, you monsters!”

Ah, so that’s what’s going on.

The six golems to emerge first had fanned into a semi-circle around the cave’s entrance, in the middle of which was the rest of the crew, still in their double diamond.

At this rate, it seemed that a fight was going to break out, but of course, the golems would not make the first move. As for the demi-humans, they assumed that the Crimson Vow had been taken hostage, putting them in a deadlock.

However, they could not just stand here glaring at each other forever, and the longer the tension grew, the more likely that someone would snap and do something unfortunate. And in such a situation, there was no doubt that the one to snap would not be on the golems’ side but one of the demi-humans.

Mile was not just going to stand around and wait for that to happen.

“Um, thank you for the escort! Return to your previous duties!”

At Mile’s command, the scavengers and golems all made a motion that resembled a nod and retreated at once inside the cave.

“Uh...”

The demi-humans were lost for words, while the merchants stood behind them, watching with worried expressions.

“Y-y-y-you...”

“H-h-h-h-how did you...”

“You can command the goleeeeeeeems?!?!?!?” the crowd screamed.

I mean, it is pretty freaky, the other three members of the Crimson Vow silently agreed.

“I wasn’t *commanding* them! They were just defending their home—they’re

pretty friendly as long as you don't attack them or threaten their territory!"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOOOOOUT?!?!"

Seriously. The other members of the Crimson Vow could only sigh.

Both the demi-humans' incredulity and the Vow's weariness were only natural.

But at this rate, the conversation was going to spiral around and around forever. Just as the Crimson Vow began to puzzle over what to do...

"They're here!" cried one of the beastmen, looking up at the sky. The others looked up in turn.

Indeed, something was approaching, soaring through the air, wings flapping atop a body that, aerodynamically speaking, really should not have been able to fly.

"Well, we've got a real all-star cast here," Mile cracked, though as usual, her joke was ignored.

"We have a way of calling the elder dragons," explained the head of the beastmen. "We aren't meant to abuse it for trivial matters, but this was a special circumstance, given that some humans appeared who seem to possess more information than we do. We'll need to consult them about this, and defer to their judgment..."

This was perfectly understandable—in fact, it was just the sort of normal, reasonable explanation that Mavis, Reina, and Pauline in particular had not heard in far too long.

The dragon flew right up to the Crimson Vow and landed gently before them. The fact that there was no strong wind or maelstroms of dust involved was further proof that the dragon's flight was a function of magic rather than aerodynamics.

"What is the meaning of calling me out here like this?! What manner of problem has occurred?!"

The elder dragon had scarcely even landed before it began to roar, surveying the scene with what appeared to be a mixture of displeasure and worry. Then,

its gaze halted on a particular point.

Flinch! Scrape, scrape.

For a moment, the dragon shuddered, then it rubbed its eyes with its front legs, sniffing the air, and stiffened.

Everyone was silent for what felt like an eternity—though it could not have been more than ten seconds. Until...

“Why, if isn’t Lady Mile! What splendid fortune, for our paths to have crossed yet again in a place like this! Oh, could it be—were you the one who called me here? In that case, your wish is my command!”

“What the heck is going on?!” the demi-humans and merchants all cried out in understandable disbelief. They had just seen a proud and haughty elder dragon lower himself to the station of a simpering errand boy in the face of a little human girl.

The Crimson Vow had much the same reaction.

“Who are you?” Mile asked suspiciously. The dragon looked back quizzically.

“It’s me!” the dragon insisted, but clearly, more information was necessary. There was no way that a human could be expected to distinguish one elder dragon from another. It was as good as expecting someone to recognize a fish or know the difference between two birds of the same species. “It’s me, Kragon!”

“No, but like...*who are you?*”

The dragon looked a bit peevish, perhaps wounded that it should have been forgotten.

“Ah... I suppose I never did give you my name back then... It’s me, the one whose tail you reattached...”

“Oh!”

At that, the Crimson Vow finally remembered.

“It seems you recall the incident now. So then, of what service may I be to you on this fine occasion?”

They were not the ones who had called the elder dragons, and so the Crimson Vow instead looked to the demi-humans. However...they were frozen, mouths agape, and clearly of no use to anyone.

"This tracks..." the members of the Crimson Vow sighed.

Meanwhile, Mile thought to herself, *Kragon the Dragon? I thought a dragon's name would've been a bit more...dignified? I guess even dragons must give their babies stupid names...*

"So that's what's going on..."

At Mile's explanation, the Tail-less Wonde—er, Kragon—quickly grasped the situation.

"Yeah, so in summary, there was nothing really left here of the ancient ruins—no materials or machinery. It was just piles of rust and empty space. The scavengers who made it here manufactured the golems, and appear to be making something else as well, but I'm assuming that whatever you elder dragons are after is something left from the distant past—records, perhaps?" Mile asked. Kragon nodded.

"So," Mile continued, "there's no point in having the demi-humans antagonize and battle the golems and scavengers, now is there? You'd just be sacrificing the demi-humans for nothing. In the worst-case scenario, the scavengers and golems at this site might come to recognize both you and the demi-humans as enemies, and spread the word to scavengers and golems all across the continent. If that happens, your further investigations into the ruins are going to become a lot more complicated."

"Er..."

"Plus, you'll be named as responsible for..."

"Ghh..."

"...the cause of a global extinction!"

"GAAAAAAH!!!"

“Come on, quit being a bully!” said Mavis, whacking Mile playfully atop the head. “It’s only chivalrous to extend a helping hand—even to elder dragons. But, hey! What’s with that cheeky look?!”

The demi-humans were watching the exchange between Mile and Kragon, stunned. One could not blame them. It was unthinkable to be so frank and casual, chiding even, towards an elder dragon, a creature that was pretty much as close to the divine as you could get. Though of course, it was bizarre that an elder dragon would be debasing itself in front of a human to begin with...

“Anyway, back to what these guys were saying...”

“Yes, it is all correct. The people of their country have already been made aware of our activities, and this group in particular has a fairly deep connection to our work... As well as being my savior. We will call this site a ‘miss,’ pack up, and relocate to one of our other investigation targets.”

Kragon shifted into a more dignified tone to address the demi-humans, but really, it was a little bit late for his dignity to be spared...

“Kragon, weren’t you a part of the battle corps?” Mile asked casually. “Why are you doing the same job as a greenhorn like Berdetice now?”

Kragon’s shoulders seemed to slump a little.

“We’re a trio of elder dragons who were sent home bruised and bloody at the hands of four humans—little girls, no less. What do you think happened?!”

“We’re sorry!” the Crimson Vow chorused.

“This really is worrisome, though...”

Kragon changed the subject, though clearly not to a happier matter.

“Hm? What’s worrisome?” Mile asked.

“Well, naturally, I’m going to have to report this incident to our leader. We’re doing this all at our leader’s behest, after all. I wonder what they’ll think when your names come up again...”

“Ah...”

As of their previous encounter, the Crimson Vow had already driven back the

elder dragons twice, which should have been plenty to earn a visit from an elimination squad. Already, other elder dragons had likely fought desperately to persuade the leader against this kind of rash action. However, for there to be a *third* incident... Of course, this time they had not driven anyone back. In fact, they were not even interfering with the investigation into the ruins! That said, one could be certain that the demi-humans would report how the golems and scavengers had been acting toward the Crimson Vow, and there was no telling how the leader of the elder dragons might react to these updates.

Furthermore, Kragon had his own duties and responsibilities, and while, during their previous exchange, he had vowed not to personally antagonize the Crimson Vow, he still could not give a false report to his clan, leader, and elders. He had his honor as an elder dragon to uphold, after all...

“Hmm. I guess we’ve got no choice... I’m sure there’s going to be some unavoidable mid-boss who comes for us, sooner or later,” Mile muttered.

“Mid-boss?”

“Mid-boss, you say?”

“You think we’ll get a mid-boss? Well, probably. It is *you*, after all...”

Pauline, Mavis, and Reina all nodded in agreement. Naturally, the concept of a “mid-boss” had become widespread knowledge, thanks to the works of a certain up-and-coming author.

“A mid-boss...” Apparently, this same author’s novels were a hit even amongst the demi-humans.

“Where is your home base, this village of yours, located anyway?”

“A bit to the southeast of here.”

“Huh?”

The members of the Crimson Vow were surprised to hear such a direct response to Mile’s casual inquiry, but the rest of the assembled party—both the demi-humans and merchants—did not seem particularly shocked.

Short of them dwelling on some solitary, remote island, there was no way that a herd of elder dragons could live in the same place for thousands of years

and still keep that location a secret. After all, there would be witnesses who could easily note the direction in which they were flying, and now and then there were probably those who sought the dragons out directly, whether in the hope of having some wish granted, or in pursuit of the title of “Dragon Buster,” or the like.

Thus, the only four people here to be surprised at Kragon’s reply were three of the members of the Crimson Vow, who had all assumed that the base would be some secret, hidden village, and Mile, who had never thought that elder dragons would live somewhere so close by.

“If it’s to the southeast, then that would put it pretty close to the ocean, right?” Mile asked, a strange expression on her face.

“Yes,” Kragon answered simply, “we aren’t far from the sea.”

“So the elder dragon village was in the Empire this whole time...”

Now that she thought about it, if you traveled northward along the coastline and entered into the Kingdom of Tils, you would be traveling toward the forest where the Crimson Vow had first encountered Berdetice—and going east-northeast across the water would get you to the country where they had encountered Kragon and the others. The more she thought about it, the more it all made sense. And in fact, this was a quintessential dragon habitat—wild, precipitous mountain ranges and all.

“So, what’re you gonna do, Mile?” asked Reina.

“Um, well, for now, I think we should just let Kragon take this report back to the village and see what happens. We’re supposed to be guarding the merchants,” Mile replied.

“That’s not what I mean! Or, sure, that’s important too, but what I was asking was what you’re going to do about this place. What do you think the Empire is gonna do once these guys pack up and leave? They’ve been sitting here making all these military preparations and stockpiling munitions. If the threat that made them shift their focus from invading other countries to dealing with internal affairs suddenly vanishes and the demi-humans no longer appear to be a threat, then they’ve got an army already ready to mobilize and heaps of supplies. And then there are all those big businesses, who’ve been buying up

goods that they think they can sell to the military at a high price, banking on a war... What do you think will happen if the demi-humans just suddenly disappear and they are left without an adversary?”

“Ah...”

There was no doubt that the Albarnian Empire would begin invading other countries immediately—starting with the Vow’s home base of Tils, to the northeast, or Mile’s home country of Brandel, to the north, or the Kingdom of Vanolark, to the northwest.

“Hmm, what to do...?”

Just as Mile fell deep into thought, one of the merchants cut in. “There’s no need to worry about that.”

“Huh?”

“This land was already making preparations for war before anything happened with the demi-humans. This incident has put a temporary halt to their plans, but they’ll be starting up again sooner or later. It would be one thing if there had been a systematic revolt of all the demi-humans in the country, as the higher-ups have been fearing, but if this is only a localized issue, with such an easily contained explanation, then they never would have directed the majority of their forces here. Really, it was just a matter of time until they sought out bigger conflicts—and that is not something you girls should be worrying yourselves over.”

“Hmm, I mean I’m sure that’s true...but that also means that when the demi-humans leave, the imperial soldiers are going to move in to investigate this place and find out what exactly it was they were doing here. If that happens, there’ll be a battle between the soldiers and the golems...”

As far as the rest of the world—or at least the Kingdom of Tils—was concerned, a battle between the golems and imperial soldiers would be welcome. Even if the monsters only took a few imperial soldiers out of commission, it would eat into their resources and make extra work for them...

However, Mile was not the sort of person who could overlook the senseless destruction of the golems, who had become her followers, even if only in name.

“Hmm... Oh, that’s it!”

Ping!

Mile grinned, beaming so brightly one could practically imagine the light bulb turning on over her head, just like in an old comic strip.

“I think it’s time your debt was repaid,” Mile said suddenly to Kragon.

“Huh?” Kragon looked dumbfounded.

“Well, last time, we saved your life, even though you unilaterally attacked and tried to kill us—and I even put your tail back on, right? I’m sure no proud elder dragon would be shameless enough to not recognize *that* as a debt...”

“O-o-obviously not! There is no such coward amongst our ranks!”

Hearing this, Mile gave a wicked grin.

This was all going according to plan...

“In that case, I have a request to make as well—” Pauline was ready to hitch onto Mile’s request with her own scheme.

Reina and Mavis could only shrug.

Chapter 90:

A Retreat

“Wh-what is that?!”

“A wyvern? ...N-no! That’s...”

“An elder dragooooon!”

Suddenly, an elder dragon came flying straight towards the imperial troops who had been monitoring the region the demi-humans were occupying. The soldiers panicked. Obviously, in a land that had been known to be inhabited by elder dragons in the distant past, there was no shortage of rumors about squads who offended a dragon and were destroyed, or entire territories left as uninhabited wastelands after crossing a dragon clan.

Even if they were to expend most of their resources and sacrifice large numbers of men to defeat a single dragon, they would only face its kin, coming to avenge the murder of a family member. And then, it would be all over for anyone who dared fight back.

There had been numerous instances of an entire royal line being wiped out, followed by wholesale changeovers of leadership, as a result of encounters with elder dragon clans. Thus, no one in this country would ever lay hands upon a single dragon.

Indeed, if faced with an elder dragon, the only thing to do was to fall to one’s hands and knees in apology—and if that was not enough, it was best to just lay down and die, so as not to be a burden to others. This was the duty of every citizen of this land.

Yet here these soldiers stood, faced with an elder dragon. They froze in place, still as statues.

The elder dragon flew right toward them...and then landed, just before reaching the soldiers. Its landing spot was shrouded by rocks and trees, and it showed no signs of further approach.

“Are we...safe?”

The dragon had landed in the spot where the demi-humans were.

Then, after a short while...

“It’s taking off again!” a soldier who had been fixedly watching the location where the dragon had landed announced loudly.

Thank goodness! It was going back home quietly!

Or so everyone thought. Until...

Ka-thoom!

Rather than flying in the direction from whence it had come, the dragon flew toward the soldiers, and in just a few seconds it had landed before them.

“Who is your commander?”

We’re doomed. This was the men’s only thought: that at this point they had no choice than for everyone here to offer up their own lives to prevent the destruction of the people of the Empire. When it came to elder dragons, this spirit of self-sacrifice was so deeply engrained into every Albarnian, that even the worst scoundrels—those who would cut down handfuls, tens, even hundreds of fellow humans without batting an eye—even such scoundrels as this could not bear to be the sole cause of the death of tens or hundreds of thousands, and the cause of the destruction of one’s motherland.

When it came down to it, it would be a literal wasteland of death, one that included one’s parents and family and friends and colleagues and mentors and neighbors... Everyone you knew, and everyone who knew you—every human, nay, every single living thing—all dead. All of them perishing while cursing your name with their dying breaths...

There was no one alive who could bear such a thing.

And so, instead, they would lay down and die. There was no point in resisting.

This was common knowledge among all citizens of this land.

“I am the one in charge here,” the commander said, stepping obediently forward.

His heart was already as placid as the mirrored surface of a lake on a windless day. Perhaps, now that he was facing death, he had reached a state of enlightenment. A faint smile hung on his face. Indeed, he was now nothing but a human sacrifice, offered up to appease the elder dragons’ wrath, just like the many who had come before him...

The elder dragon simply glanced at the commander and spoke.

“We have built a second home in the mountains ahead of here, which you are not permitted to approach. So long as you do not set foot in that part of the mountains, you may continue to use this road. Understood?”

“...Y-yes?”

“Un-der-stood?”

“Y-yes!”

The commander was stunned. What else could he say? If he could avert an elder dragon crisis without a single loss of life, he would be a national hero, awarded badges—no, medals, land, and likely even a peerage. At the very least, there was no possible way he would be punished or even scolded for his course of action.

“Very good. Farewell!” said the dragon as it finally took off again, this time toward the southeast.

“W-w-w-w-we’re *saaaved*!!!” The soldiers rejoiced, still glued to the spots where they had frozen in terror.

Hidden by her cloaking magic, Mile grinned from where she had been watching the scene.

It was all going according to plan...

“So anyway, there’s a pretty slim chance of the soldiers coming to this place

now,” Mile cheerfully reported.

“They definitely won’t be coming!” the other three members of the Crimson Vow agreed.

The demi-humans, of course, were still stunned into silence.

“Now then, as long as you don’t pick fights with any imperial soldiers, you’ll be just fine. If you can just break off into a few groups and slip off into the night, you should be able to make it home without any difficulty. The golems won’t be bothering the soldiers either, so they should be able to live in peace...”

“It’s not just the soldiers,” Reina added. “*No one* is going to come here! There’s going to be an official decree not to set foot in this area in no time! Probably a decree so strict that if you put a single toe over the line, you’ll be hanged.”

“Yes, well, that makes sense. One wrong move and it could be the downfall of the entire country,” Mavis shrugged.

“Huh? Wait—then doesn’t that mean Mile made a pretty bad move in beating some elder dragons half to death—twice?” Pauline asked.

Reina and Mavis shrugged. What was done was done.

Kragon the elder dragon departed, and it was decided that the demi-humans would retreat in several small groups that very night.

Meanwhile, Mile called to the scavengers, instructing them to employ a number of deception tactics, such as constructing a full-scale moveable replica elder dragon tail, which could be pushed out from the mouth of the cave if any humans drew near, as well as devices to reproduce a dragon’s roar and breath. With precautions like these in place, they would be just fine for the time being.

Additionally, the event would likely cause enough of a stir among this country’s leadership that they would not be able to focus on any invasion efforts for some time. Of course, once this chaos was sown, they would not be able to do anything about it, and it was possible that this would cause more chaos as they began jumping at every shadow, for fear of an elder dragon

attack... Clearly, no one would be able to march right into the area and demand that the elder dragons come out.

Furthermore, Mile had asked Kragon to pop in at the site from time to time, as a bit of an additional service. Even if he did not do anything when he arrived, a few sightings of him would be enough to establish a credible record of elder dragons being present in the area.

For an elder dragon, the distance from Kragon's village to the site was about the same as the distance that a Japanese person living in the city might have to travel from their home to the local convenience store—in other words, not far. Considering the favor Mile had done for him with his tail, coming here once a month or so was nothing.

“All right, let's retreat!”

Their business here was officially finished...as was their business in the Empire as a whole. Their plan now was to go back home. But first, they would continue on to the seaside, as planned, stock up on some seaside products, and travel along the coast northward, back to the Kingdom of Tils.

The Crimson Vow said their farewells to the demi-humans and set out with the merchants once more...

“Thank you so much for everything.”

The caravan made it safely back to the Kingdom of Tils without incident.

There, the Crimson Vow received a sincere thanks from the merchants, along with a carefully calculated additional sum for the goods the merchants had borrowed from Mile's storage, the food shared with them, and a huge bonus. All this, along with an A-grade on their job completion report... Not that there was any other grade they *could* have gotten.

The guild handled payment for escort jobs in exchange for the signed completion report, so that part of their fee would not come from the merchants themselves. But in this case, it should go without saying that the bonus amounted to far more than the original fee for the job ever would have.

In truth, the job had been quite lucrative for the Crimson Vow.

“Hee hee hee, what a score!” Pauline said with a grin.

Sure enough, when Mile had made her request of Kragon, Pauline had tagged on one of her own—for some scales, and a fragment of one of the dragon’s talons.

Obviously, Kragon had been less than pleased about this, but he did not seem to have the courage to refuse her. Reluctantly, he parted with several scales, and a talon fragment.

Picking off a scale that had not been naturally shed seemed like an excruciating ordeal. And because he had begged not to have a whole talon torn off, they had compromised instead on just a small clipping. Of course, Pauline had healed him after the scales were removed, and the talon would grow back out soon enough.

Mile felt a bit bad about how down in the dumps Kragon looked after having his back nail trimmed, so she carved a cool-looking pattern into the cut talon that seemed to cheer him right back up.

Apparently, he was rather fond of his new look.

Since her time as Misato, Mile had always had a well-honed artistic skill, so with an extra sharp nanomachine-crafted blade on hand, this kind of detailed work was a cinch.

It would not do to engrave an elder dragon’s talon with a rising dragon emblem, or an ogre or mantichore. That would be akin to tattooing a human with a picture of a house mouse, and not at all a suitable look for a fierce creature like Kragon. So, instead of opting for an image of any creature or demon or god, she simply carved a abstract pattern.

Plus, once Pauline had chipped off a piece of a nail that would be suitable to make a sword or knife, it was now slightly thinner, sharper, and had the look of a menacing, sinister weapon.

Mile started to really get into the groove of it when Kragon told her that every elder dragon has a special symbol that means something to them, and she carved Kragon’s symbol in reverse on his front claw.



“This way,” she explained, “if you flick someone on the forehead, your symbol will be engraved there, and they’ll never forget your power or fearsomeness as long as they live... Assuming that you don’t use so much power that you flick their head right off. Plus, whenever you visit a demi-human or human village, you can push your claw into a dirt wall or big tree, and your name will be passed down through the ages.”

At this, Kragon was extremely pleased and thanked Mile profusely before flying off to do her bidding.

In truth, Mile had thought to do this in order to create an incentive for Kragon to hold back his strength, merely placing his mark upon anyone he came to blows with, rather than killing them senselessly.

“Well, I’d say this has been quite a productive day...” Mile was quite satisfied with herself.

“Hee hee! Even this much of a nail is enough to make a few blades! I’ve never even heard of a blade made from an elder dragon’s talon. I wonder how I should price that...”

For her part, Pauline was equally pleased.

Sure enough, there were times when elder dragons would hand over scales they had already shed to humans as a thanks or apology, but no one had ever heard of one ripping off and handing over a talon. Which meant that there was no way anyone would be getting their hands on such a thing without locating and desecrating an elder dragon graveyard—a crime that would most certainly see not only the offender, but perhaps their entire home country—completely wiped out.

“Of course, once these are removed from an elder dragon’s body, they lose some of their potency, but they’re still light and fairly sturdy. Besides, no one would be using this sort of thing for day-to-day purposes. Anything made with it would be stored away in the palace vaults as a national treasure, or used for some kind of temple rites,” Mavis said.

“Right. No one would be stupid enough to use a weapon like that in a real battle,” Reina agreed. “It’d be like using a sword forged of pure gold.”

She was right. A pure gold blade would be expensive, heavy, and far too soft—such that it would likely warp after a single blow. Because it was soft, it would not break, necessarily, but gold was certainly not the sort of material one would want to go around using as a sword.

An elder dragon's talon was, of course, much stronger, and could probably stand up to practical use, but still, no one would use something so expensive as part of their standard equipment.

That, however, was not enough to lower the value of such an object. Simply by virtue of being a blade made of an elder dragon's talon, it would be a great treasure. In fact, its high price was yet another reason why something like this would not put into everyday use.

"We should probably sell these outside the Empire. They have too much history with—or at least too much fear of—elder dragons. Who knows what they'd do if they even laid eyes on such a thing?" said Pauline. The other three nodded.

And thus, Pauline's talon blade became something that they would be holding on to for a while. Processing the talon and crafting the blades was something Mile could do in her spare time over the next several months. After all, it would cause quite a fuss if they were to bring such rare materials to a smith, and quite a lot of trouble for that smith, to be asked to work in something other than metal.

For some time after that, the Crimson Vow lived a normal life—or at least, normal for *them*—until, one day...

"Crimson Vow, there's a letter for you from the guild post," announced the guild clerk, handing them an envelope.

"It says it's from... Wait, what's with this weird crest?"

"Crest?"

Typically, if the sender of the letter was using a crest, they were a noble or royal. Mavis, who was familiar with such things, looked hurriedly at the letter in Reina's hands and then frowned.

“Hm, this isn’t the seal of any noble house. It doesn’t have any of the typical elements or follow any heraldry standards...”

Pauline craned her head in to look as well. “Still, I feel like I’ve seen this somewhere before.”

After pondering it for some time, Mile chimed in, “Oh! That’s the one I carved!”

“Huh?”

Sure enough, it was Kragon’s mark, the one that she had carved into his talon. Naturally, the scale was quite different, so this crest could not have been made from the talon stamp itself, but it did carry the same image.

“Because I carved it in backwards, I didn’t recognize it for a moment!” Mile chuckled.

“Amazing to think that he could hold a quill in those huge hands. He must be awfully dexterous...”

“Obviously, he got a demi-human or someone to write it! Also, that’s not important! What matters is what’s written *inside* the letter!” Reina shouted.

The other three nodded their agreement. “That’s true.”

Suddenly, they noticed that the clerk who had handed them the letter—as well as virtually every employee and hunter in the building—was looking their way, ears pricked.

“.....”

Quickly, the Crimson Vow made their exit.

Chapter 91:

A Summons

“A summons?” asked Pauline.

From the guild, the four scurried back to their room at the inn to open the letter. Inside, they found...

“Well, I’d say the gist of it is a ‘come and meet me behind the bleachers’ sort of vibe,” said Mile.

“What does that mean? What is a ‘bleacher’ anyway?”

Reina’s shoulders slumped. Whenever she didn’t get one of Mile’s references, she put it down to her own shortcoming. Mavis, on the other hand, brushed it aside as she always did.

“It’s a summons from the elder dragons,” clarified Mile. “Either we go to them, or they’re going to come to us.”

This was clearly a threat, but Mile did not appear to have realized this.

The others were silent.

“It seems like Kragon was just the intermediary here,” Mile continued. “It’s someone else who actually has business with us.”

Reina shrugged wearily.

“This is definitely bad news, right? I doubt they’d bother contacting us if there wasn’t something wrong, and if they had some update or announcement for us they’d just write it in the letter. Besides, if it was some little matter, that dragon would come here himself, or send some beastman messenger to meet him in the forest or mountains. The fact that we have to meet with some other dragon means something serious is going on.”

“It’s like, ‘Hey, Big Bro, those are the guys!’ right?” asked Mavis, grimacing.

Based on their interactions with Kragon, he did not seem the type, but there was no doubting that someone who outranked him was hoping to meet with

the Crimson Vow about some less-than-happy matter.

“If we refuse, a gang of elder dragons is going to come to the capital, which would be a serious problem.”

“That would never fly!”

“It’d turn into the Great Human-Dragon War...”

In fact, the Great Human-Dragon War was a fairy tale depicting an all-out war between humanoids and dragons. However, it was nothing more than a work of fiction, not something that had ever actually happened in the past. Incidentally, it was a fairy tale that had been around for a long time—and for once had nothing to do with Miami Satodele.

“We had better go.”

“I guess we have to.”

“We don’t have much choice.”

“Let’s go, Pegasus!”

Who the heck is Pegasus?

Indeed, the Crimson Vow had no other choice. No matter how little they wanted to go. No matter how much they wished to ignore the letter. No matter how badly they wanted to run.

Imagine if the elder dragons, infuriated at being ignored, came to the royal capital of Tils... As long as any other choice existed, they would choose that. It was just as that merchant, Galadle, must have felt: they truly had no other options...

“So anyway, here we are, back in the south of the Albarn Empire, somewhere fairly close to the sea. Indeed, we are approaching the Village of the Elder Dragons!”

“Who are you explaining this to?” Reina asked wearily, as Mile proudly narrated their location—a fact of which they were all aware.

“Why did we have to come all the way out here?” Pauline grumbled.

“Elder dragons can travel this sort of distance like it’s nothing, so they probably have no concept of how much time and energy it takes other creatures to do the same,” Mavis replied.

“I guess so. I suppose it’d be a problem if they’d shown up back near the capital...”

At any rate, the Crimson Vow was back in the Albarnian Empire, now approaching the elder dragons’ village.

“They only told us to come to this vague area, but we don’t have any landmarks, and they didn’t establish a date and time... Elder dragons are pretty big, so they should be easy to spot, but they’re probably gonna send out some beastman as a point of contact, so finding *them* is gonna be—”

“There! Right over there!” Mile piped up, cutting off Reina’s train of thought. As usual.

“Are you the Crimson Vow?” asked a solitary beastman, approaching the four hunters. It seemed he had been waiting here for some days, as there was a tent pitched nearby.

“Did Kragon send you?”

“That’s right. Now, could you all look to the sky and shoot up three fireballs?”

“Can’t they come up with a way for you to signal them yourselves?” the Crimson Vow asked, stunned to find themselves in this position yet again.

“Most beastfolk can’t use magic. What d’you want from us?! Are you gonna wait around while I go gather up a bunch of kindling and dried logs and twigs and get a great big signal fire going? Huh?”

“Our apologies. Please allow me to shoot the fireballs...”

Mile fired three fireballs up into the sky, and a short time later, a group of elder dragons appeared—nine of them.

“Whoa, the whole gang’s here!”

“That’s way too many!”

If this many people—er, dragons—were showing up, then it was clearly a good thing the Crimson Vow had traveled here instead of the dragons going into Tils to meet them. Having this many elder dragons show up near any human settlement would be enough to send the entire continent into a panic. Every nation in the world would probably start gathering their forces and announce a state of emergency...

Thwoom, thwoom, thwoom.

One by one, the dragons landed in front of the Crimson Vow. The nine then split into three groups of six, two, and one. One side of the group of two faced the Crimson Vow and began to speak.

“It’s been a while, Crimson Vow...”

Supreme Leader Dessler?!

Even at times like this, Mile was functioning as normal.

“But we just saw you a little while ago, Mr. Kragon...”

“It’s me! Berdetice!!”

“I’m sure you can’t tell, but I’m Kragon...” said the other half of the pair.

“If you know that we can’t tell you all apart, then just give your names from the start!” harrumphed Reina.

The dragon pair looked annoyed, but there was nothing to be done for it.

“And those fresh faces over there would be...?”

Prompted by Mile’s question, the pair finally remembered their role here. Kragon, the senior of the pair and the one who had sent the letter, introduced the others.

“Here before you is our leader, Lord Laylen. The other six here are our most elite warrior squad.”

“Oh, the group that you used to be part of!”

“Don’t mention that!”

Apparently, it was still a sore subject for him.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow sighed, stunned as always at Mile's utter lack of social awareness. *That's not something you should ever bring up...*

"Um... Can I ask something?" Mile asked suddenly.

"What is it?" Kragon replied, warmly gesturing for her to proceed.

Frankly, Mile asked the question that was on her mind.

"Umm, if you're facing us down, shouldn't all the warriors be standing guard around your leader?"

The group of six was silent. Kragon and Berdetice's faces twitched in shock.

The six warriors froze in place. Then, eight dragon heads swiveled slowly towards their leader, with an almost audible creaking.

He was angry.

The leader was furious.

Mile had as good as said, "You're about to be attacked by a group of four little human girls, so you should probably have your fellow dragons guarding you." In fact, that was exactly what she *was* saying.

These were not the sort of words that a proud young elder dragon could abide...

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wha-?"

Oh no...

She had done it. The other three members of the Crimson Vow were acutely aware of Mile's mistake.

The other eight elder dragons' faces twitched as well...or at least they seemed to. It was difficult for a human to read an elder dragon's expressions.

"Cr-cr-cr..."

What's that sound? Sounds a bit like a chicken. Come to think of it, I've heard that chickens are descended from dinosaurs...

“You CRETIIINS!!!”

Ah.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow hung their heads. This was hopeless. Their conversation had broken down from the very start. Fortunately, it was time for someone older, with far more experience, to make their debut.

“Gracious leader, it behooves us to smile kindly upon the foolish words of these lower life forms.”

“Hm... I suppose that’s true.”

The leader seemed to perk back up at this advice from the leader of the battle squad... Clearly, he was a simple sort.

I wonder if it really is true that elder dragons are smarter than humans.

Doubt began to bubble up in the backs of the Crimson Vow’s minds. That said, as Berdetice had previously explained, this leader was a juvenile, and possessed the characteristic ailments of youth, one of which was that he was all too confident in his own abilities. Obviously, he was convinced that he was a smart and powerful elder dragon, one who would rule the world and guide the fools who dwelled upon it—but perhaps this was more of an individual condition. Especially since he was no longer an adolescent but still seemed to behave in a thoroughly juvenile way...

Calm once more, the leader began to speak again.

“Now then, let’s get down to the crux of the matter. For repeatedly daring to oppose we elder dragons, you lot will be sentenced to death.”

Clearly, there had been no point in calming him down, if it was going to come to this.

Hey, Nanos. How many feet up in the air do you all exist?

Realizing their situation was hopeless, Mile began a covert conversation with the nanomachines. Because in her previous life, her father had worked in the field of aviation, Mile (or rather Misato) had grown accustomed to referring to heights in feet instead of meters.

THERE IS NO MEANING IN US EXISTING IN LOCATIONS WHERE THERE ARE NO LIVING CREATURES TO RESPOND TO. THEREFORE, WE DO NOT EXIST ANY HIGHER THAN BIRDS AND WYVERNS FLY.

But you could go even higher than you are now?

YES, OF COURSE! AT YOUR COMMAND, LADY MILE, WITH YOUR LEVEL-5 AUTHORIZATION, WE CAN DISPATCH A TEMPORARY AERONAUTICS TEAM OUTSIDE OF OUR ESTABLISHED SERVICE AREA. FURTHERMORE, AS IT IS YOU, EVEN IF WE SHOULD EXIT THE AREA WHICH CAN BE DIRECTLY REACHED BY YOUR THOUGHT PULSES, WE CAN CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN YOUR PREVIOUS COMMANDS. AND OF COURSE, NEARBY UNITS CAN TRANSMIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS TO THE UNITS MAINTAINING THOSE COMMANDS, AND...

So you're saying I can send conditional commands to nanomachines tens of thousands of feet up in the air...

THAT'S CORRECT.

Okay, in that case, anyone who's free right now, up into the air with you!

With that, a number of nanomachines sped toward the sky.

Up, up, and away...

"I don't get you all! First the dragon Wence comes rushing in, then Kragon and company launch a one-sided attack on us, and still we helped you deceive the Empire to stop a war between them and the demi-humans! You should be *thanking* us! Why is it you have to kill us? This doesn't make any sense!" Reina argued, indignant, as the other three nodded along.

However, the leader of the elder dragons did not appear to be paying the Crimson Vow any mind.

"Have you no sense?! You must face the consequences of your own actions, for daring to spit in the faces of the great and powerful elder dragons! Would you not squash a mosquito or fly that buzzed around your face without a care?"

"....."

Mosquito or fly?

If that was how the dragons saw them, there was nothing they could do.

Berdetice and Kragon seemed to think of humans as defenseless lesser life forms, while that young girl dragon, Shelala, seemed to regard them on the level of kittens. This leader, however, considered them nothing more than irritating insects. Clearly, it would be pointless to try to reason with him. He had not come here to talk, after all. He had come seeking the satisfaction of watching the Crimson Vow squirm as he handed down their death sentence. He'd brought them all the way out here because it would be unwise for so many dragons to show up near a human settlement and also because it would simply be a bother for him to make the trip. Everything was going exactly as he had intended.

Of course, the Crimson Vow had anticipated this might happen. Even Kragon had warned them of the possibility. So, naturally, they had not come unprepared.

Ultra-Super Deluxe Hot Magic activate... Crimson Inferno, Full Power!

Burn, heart of mine, tremble, my spirit... In the name of Mile, and in my own, I, Mavis, command you! Beloved sword of mine, to your original form!!!

Mavis gripped a capsule of micros within her pocket.

In the name of Kurihara Misato, Adele von Ascham, and Mile, I command... Nanomachines! Je vous commande!

Oil, thickener, compressed air... Blazing firebomb, ready fire!

As Reina made her protest, the others began silently preparing their attacks. Once she was finished, she joined in on the preparations as well.

“Gracious leader, please wait a moment! Harming defenseless creatures without reason goes against the teachings of our elders!”

“They’ve only lived but a handful of years—they are mere infants! Have some mercy!”

Berdetice and Kragon tried to stall him, but the leader had no intention of listening. He was already beyond all admonition or advice. “Silence! Now then, kneel before me and beg for your lives—though I have no intention of sparing you!”

The Crimson Vow resigned themselves to what they had to do. The dragons might speak the human tongue, but there would be no communication with this one.

Despite the thorough thrashing that Berdetice and Kragon had received at their hands, both dragons had still shown the members of the Crimson Vow kindness later. However, something told the hunters that these two were simply more inclined to indulgent compassion for lower life forms. Just as a human might throw their arms around a dog or cat who had saved them in a pinch...

Now, Berdetice and Kragon looked resigned. The six warriors seemed troubled as well, but none of them were ready to risk their own position by admonishing their leader for the sake of four lesser creatures' lives.

Even if Berdetice and Kragon stayed out of the fight, as per their agreement with the Crimson Vow—and even if the leader only stood by on the sidelines, they'd still be up against six elder dragon warriors. And, unlike the one-by-one battle of the time before, this would likely be all six of them, all at once...

This is hopeless.

The four signaled to each other with their eyes, silently agreeing to abandon all efforts to resolve this peacefully.

All that remained was...

"Goodness, what an ignorant little brat. So spoiled and pampered by all the adults around him!"

"I don't envy your task, dear babysitters. I can imagine just how you feel..."

"I suppose even elder dragons can be fools..."

"Should we chop off your tail, too?"

"Eee!"

At Mavis's threat, a certain dragon instinctively clutched his own tail.

If battle could not be avoided, it was advantageous to rile up one's opponent. Even if one couldn't unsettle the actual combatants, it might help at least a little to rob their commander of any rational decision-making capabilities.

“Wha...? K-kill theeeem!!!”

The six warrior dragons immediately took thudding steps towards the Crimson Vow.

“Perfect. We’ve got a leader there who just senselessly ordered our deaths, and six of his warriors are coming directly towards us. I’d say this is legitimate grounds for self-defense!”

Indeed, just as Mile was implying—even if they killed the young leader now, they could plead self-defense, meaning the rest of the dragons probably would not declare war on humanity in retaliation. Elder dragons, after all, were a wise and compassionate race—save for those youths possessed of an unshakeable belief in elder dragon supremacy, of course. If they reflected on the manner in which they had failed to educate or guide this leader “beloved by the spirits of magic,” it would be clear to them that the elder dragons were at fault, not the humans, who had merely reacted to their attack. Indeed, the Crimson Vow hoped they might even give them a few scales in apology—though this was the sort of thing that only happened once every few decades, or centuries.

And so...

“It’s no holds barred!” Mile announced.

Without even a word of acknowledgment, Reina and Pauline fired off the completed spells they had been holding. Mavis pulled the micros from her pocket and swallowed them in one gulp. To save her popping capsules one-by-one, this time she had been provided with a special large vial, containing three times the usual amount of micros. The bottle was colored red, indicative of the risk... Three times the dose, after all, was serious business.

In fact, Mile had been incredibly hesitant when Mavis first requested such a large dosage, but she could not refute Mavis’s point that, “There’s no point in me dying just to avoid damage to my body, is there?” Plus, if she maneuvered her now artificial left arm to reduce the load on the rest of her, then she should be more or less fine. Only because of this was Mile willing to reluctantly oblige.

“Blazing firebomb, fire!”

“Crimson Inferno!”

“EX True Godspeed Blade Third Form, ‘Dragon Guillotine’!!!”

“Phaser Beam, fire!”

Ka-shoom!

Bwoooow!

Ka-slash!

Pew! Pew! Pew!

And thus, the Great Human-Dragon Wars were underway...

Bonus Story:

What Would You Take to a Desert Island?

“Hey, everyone, if you were going to wash up all alone on the shore of a desert island, and you could only have one thing with you, what would you take?”

“Here we go again with the out-of-nowhere nonsense ...”

As usual, Mile had brought up some inscrutable line of questioning out of the blue. And as usual, Reina and the others went along with it. Truth be told, Mile sometimes asked these sorts of questions specifically as reference for the books that she secretly wrote under a pen name. Her knowledge from her previous life, combined with the far too many novels she had read, made it well-nigh impossible for her to craft plausible stories entirely on her own.

And so...

“A sword!”

Who could have expected any other response from Mavis?

A sword was the obvious choice for the swordswoman, but Reina and Pauline were mages, and did not actually need their staves for casting magic. The staff was nothing more than a weapon for beating away approaching monsters or enemies who fought at melee. If they wanted a staff, they could just cut down a tree branch on the island and make one.

And so, Mile wondered what the pair of them would choose...

“A boat!”

“Bzzt! Bzzt! Pauline!” Mile waved her hands around in front of her chest in exasperation.

This phrasing was one that Mile used often that everyone had come to understand that this meant something along the lines of, *Out of bounds, try again.*

“The Kingdom of Balmore!”

“*Bzzt! Bzzt!* Reina! If you bring along a whole country, that’s a populace of hundreds of thousands—millions! Then it’s not a desert island anymore! You wouldn’t be surviving, you’d just be living normally and could buy whatever you wanted in town!”

Before her reincarnation, Mile herself had read novels where the main character was reincarnated in a fantasy world. In some of those books, they could do whatever they wanted from the get-go, regardless of only being able to take one thing with them through their reincarnation. Sometimes, they were even reincarnated with an intergalactic heavy cruiser, controlled by humanoid computers—which of course came with androids shaped like cute girls to serve the main character as navigation terminals.

“The night is heavy. Er, shut up! Morning and noon are heavy, too!”

The other three stared speechless as Mile carried on her one-woman routine. Just then...

“Oh, I know!” said Mavis, hitting her forehead in a d’oh gesture. “There’s one single thing you could take, that if you had it, you would never want for anything...”

“Huh?” asked Reina and Pauline, while Mile peered at Mavis, intrigued.

“So, what is it?”

“Mile!” Mavis replied.

“*Huh?*”

“It’s you, Mile. If I had you, I’d never have to worry about food. If my sword broke, you could fix it, and if I got bored you could tell me fairy tales. You know so many stories and games, and I wouldn’t even have to worry about stray dragons. It’s perfect! You only need one Mile per household. With the right preparations, she never causes any trouble, she’s compact, so there’s never any difficulty finding somewhere to store her, and she’s light and easy to carry,” Mavis explained.

“That’s true!” Reina and Pauline agreed immediately. It was pretty brilliant.

However...

“Gaaah! I said you’re going there alone. *Alone!* Also, are you saying that I’m a ‘thing’ you can just take with you?!?!”

“I mean, we always say it’s ridiculous how useful you are...”

“Shut up!”

Mile was fuming.

A month later...

“Oh, hey, Miami Satodele’s got a new book out... Something something... *My Life on a Deserted Island with an All-Powerful Sorcerer Girl?*”

Mile had adopted the plotline wholesale.

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. FUNA here! We've finally reached Volume 12 of *Averbil*!

Indeed, the official abbreviation of this series' title isn't "Heikinchi" (*Average*), it's "Noukin" (*Averbil*)! Searching for "Heikinchi" gets you way too many unrelated hits, which is a marketing problem, especially with the anime.

A: "What should we do about the voice levels in here?"

B: "Huh? The 'Average' ones?"

A: "Oh, average them then. Got it!"

B: "Huh? What the heck was that about...?"

MILE: "You're just imagining that!"

REINA: "This is totally fake!"

Guarding some false merchants, the Crimson Vow head into the enemy lands of the Empire. As usual, they end up embroiled in chaos, and then, once again, face *those* certain foes! A fearsome new battle begins! A battle that will decide the fate of the world...

MAVIS: "Hey, the Nanos in the manga version kind of look like Wapuro from *Agedama*, don't they?"

REINA: "There you go saying something that no one else understands again..."

PAULINE: "Or like the Father from *Space Family Carlvinson*..."

REINA: "They don't! Not one bit!"

The anime will be airing soon, being broadcast to the whole country—and the world! Please watch the first few episodes! Then, you can decide if you want to quit or watch all the way to the end.

Please look forward to Volume 4 of the manga adaptation and Volume 1 of the spin-off manga as well!

The fifth volumes of *Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for my Retirement* and *I Shall Survive Using Potions!*, the other two series in my Flat-Chested Teen Girl Trinity, were also released recently, with the fifth volumes of the manga versions of both following soon after. Thanks for letting me tack the continued serialization of these other FUNA series onto the announcement of the *Averbil* anime's release! I won't give up until I see my other works animated as well!

Indeed...

I am yet another step closer to my dreams...

Right, right, that reminds me—there are now Wikipedia articles for both FUNA and for *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?! Compared to all the detail in the Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?! article, the FUNA page is pretty bare bones...*

Next, we just need articles for the other two series. I mean—not that I'm demanding that anyone make them for me or anything...

Finally, to the chief editor; to Itsuki Akata, the illustrator; to Yoichi Yamakami, the cover designer; to everyone involved in the proofreading, editing, printing, binding, distribution, and selling of this book; to all the reviewers on *Let's Be Novelists* who gave me their impressions, guidance, suggestions, and advice; and most of all, to everyone who's taken these stories into their homes, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

We will meet again in the next volume. Just keep on believing...

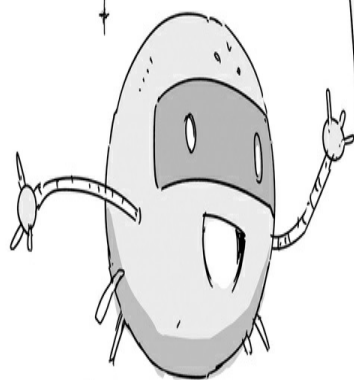
—FUNA

AFTERWORD... OR SOMETHING?

THE NANOS ARE ADORABLE IN THE ANIME AND THE MANGA!

THE ANIME
NANO-CHAN
IS SUPER
EASY TO
DRAW!

SORRY THAT THEY DON'T REALLY
APPEAR IN THE NOVEL...



THE MANGA NANOS ARE SUPER APPEALING!

THE ANIME IS NOW AIRING...

I'M SO MOVED... PLEASE ENJOY IT!

聖方逸和 ITSUKI
AKATA



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